Panther
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Freaks, natural and supernatural, slither and crawl from every page
DARK TIDES
ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

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'For twenty years nobody has rivalled Russell at his best.'

Brian W. Aldiss

DARK TIDES

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Introduction

If you like the verbose pomposity of literary grand opera, or if you think it essential that a story should convey a message that has been chewed to rags for a thousand years or more, this book is not for you. Go away. Shoo!

But if you can and do enjoy the strangeness, the oddity, the something-not-quite-real of a circus performance, you should get somewhat similar entertainment out of these pages.

The stories herein are not classifiable except that they are off the beaten track and some of them may be off their heads as well. They are not about circuses. They are not science-fiction. They are not ghost stories. They resemble a circus only in being a well organized mess created for the benefit of people who like having their imaginations tickled.

Some of the plots may be no more mildly interesting than a lady bare-backed rider, or as thrilling as the daring young man on the flying trapeze, or as downright silly as a painted clown. One or two may even be boring. Not all turns please all tastes at the same time. So eat your apple and let the show go on.

To serve this likeness to a sort of literary circus there should be a troupe of elephants in this book. Believe it or not, they have been included and what more could you want for your money than that? The publisher has generously provided them in the last story, near to the end. They serve no purpose other than as a colourful touch in a hunted man's life. The man is a murderer —or is he? What should be done with him when he is caught? You might like to figure it out for yourself by stepping into his shoes.

As the title states, this is a book about dark tides in human affairs. You may find them well worth contemplating.

E. F. Russell

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The Sin of Hyacinth Peuch

In one of the dales of Brittany close upon the woody border of the Department de Morbihan nestles a tiny village called Chateauverne. Is that name familiar to you?

If it isn't, that is because M. le Préfect de Morbihan and his superiors in Paris did all they could to keep its stranglings out of the newspapers. There is no point in spreading terror beyond terror. Besides, the tourist trade had to be considered.

The Abbé Courtot co-operated by sealing the lips of the faithful so far as they could be sealed, which was for about five yards from his person, he being somewhat deaf.

To look at Chateauverne today you would find it difficult to believe that not so long ago its inhabitants feared to walk in darkness. Some of the signs are still there: a certain tenseness among the younger folk, a reluctance to take their love-making into the shadowed nooks of seldom-used paths.

If observant, you will note that even the oldest, most neglected and tumbledown houses have heavy shutters of solid oak fitted with enormous bolts and hand-forged bars that kept Emile Périé busy at his anvil for more than a month.

Here and there may be seen a few tired-eyed folk in sombre clothes. The attendance at the Eglise Ste-Marie is twenty per cent greater than of yore, more regular, more reverent. Of course, there still remains a hard core of incorrigibles who sit the other side of the square, drinking and spitting, watching the parade of the pious with the air of men convinced that only dirty people need to wash. Nevertheless, the Devil added to the Abbé's flock by taking away from it.

Chateauverne is a cluster of terra-cotta-roofed houses hugging a cobbled square where Hyacinth Peuch, the local imbecile, slumbers among the hogs and chickens. At one side rises the solemn-belled tower of the Eglise. Next to it sits the hoary home of the Abbé and the general store of the Widow Martin. At the opposite side, shading the seated cynics, is the long, low auberge of Jean-Pierre Boitavin, whose brother Baptiste was the fourth to be slaughtered before the rain came.

The population numbers six hundred, has not waxed or waned

in the last couple of centuries. Chateauverne's citizens are almost entirely devoted to agriculture—if constant itching and bitching can be called devotion—and therefore have the earthy sophistication of those in daily contact with lower and gustier forms of life. They procreated judiciously, with one eye upon later years and the other on the bank balance. In the Abbé's opinion they knew more than was good for their immortal souls.

Death clattered bonily onto this stage one warm evening in May when the air was rich and slumbersome and night beetles droned under the trees.

Josephine Rimbaud had a date. She was young, buxom, interestingly rounded and far from overburdened with intellectual capacity. This tender and inviting handicap lent a splendid impartiality to her emotions, so much so, indeed, that she had been known to respond with a tempting smile to the vacuous grin of Hyacinth Peuch who—though not so far sunk in idiocy as to overlook a well-turned leg—was generally regarded as a most deplorable accomplice in any amatory adventure.

That Josephine should be a trifle lacking in one respect while obviously possessing more than a sufficiency in others was a matter requiring correction at somebody's hands. It is natural to urge others toward perfection. Of the many tutors who were eager to assist with her education she chose Hercule Girandole, a farmer's son, because he had wavy hair and Hercule sounds massive and mighty and a *girandole* is a revolving firework. She was by no means averse to dallying with a revolving firework.

So at eight o'clock when shadows were deepening, Josephine set forth, intent upon improving her mind by taking simple lessons in biology from the worthy and accomplished Hercule. She had attired herself in ribbons and flounces that suitably enhanced her feminine attractions, was sweetly scented in the likeliest places and athirst for education.

Trotting gaily in the full length of the Avenue des Hirondelles, once part of the Verne estate, she took a narrow thicket-flanked path toward the old plantation where a dozen generations before her had shyly retired for the same delightful purpose.

The trysting place was by a small granite obelisk inscribed: *Ici La Météorite de 1897.* This was not literally correct, for the stone from space had been exhumed years ago and sent some place where it could be snooped over by profound old men long in the hair and short in the sight. Even the hole it had caused was now filled and overgrown. Trees crowded all around, shutting out the

rays of the inquisitive moon and assuring a pleasing privacy for the vibrant couples beneath.

Stopping by the obelisk, Josephine peered around as best she could in the semi-dark. A warm, gentle wind sighed through the trees. The turf was softer than a bed. Josephine was ready.

'Hercule!' She whispered it tremulously. She could do little else. Such an underbreath call is seductive, enticing, whereas the commanding bellow she yearned to utter would have been unmaidenly. She tidied her bosom, wondering whether he was hiding from her, tantalizing her, waiting for her to ripen to desperation. 'Hercule!'

No response. Only the rustling of the trees and the wind sighing high. She frowned. Possibly he was late. If so, it was unseemly of him. The female may be tardy to emphasize her modesty, her shy reluctance to enter the trap so long as no other female beats her to it. But the male should be on time. Better still, ahead of time, early. Stamping, fidgeting, alternating between hope and despair, racked by passion, consumed with desire.

This was too bad. Her indignation rising along with her inward hunger, she walked around the obelisk, sought behind a bush, went to investigate the other side of a nearby tree and tumbled headlong over a pair of tangled legs.

Scrambling upright with no other thought than that this evening had a potent curse upon it, she stooped and peered at the legs, followed the dim shape along to its distorted face, discovered that the revolving firework would fizz no more.

Josephine turned and ran. No screams. No gasps. No wild and terrible calls for help. Only her mouth open, her ample hips swinging as she ran in utter silence, without stop or pause, the full two kilometres to the village. The first person she saw was the Widow Martin looming massively in the door of her store. Racing up to her she gasped a few frantic words, dropped to the cobblestones and gave herself over to a fit of hysterics.

Now, the Widow Martin weighed one hundred kilos, had a black moustache and once had killed a hog with a backhand blow intended to discourage it from her vegetable patch. Germaine Joubert, the village gossip, often swore that the unfortunate animal had performed three somersaults before it closed its eyes and expired with an expression exactly like that of the late Henri Martin in his last moments, a similarity that might well be no coincidence. You will gather from this that the Widow Martin

was *très formidable* and the last person to be moved by Josephine's anguish.

Staring down over her lip-fungus, she snapped, 'No matter what that wastrel Girandole has done, rolling in horse-dung will not cure it.'

Hippolyte Lemaître left his seat outside the auberge and mooched across the square, followed by Hyacinth Peuch and several others. All gaped at Josephine, especially at the little extra she did not display in more sanguine moments.

Hippolyte spoke to the Widow Martin: 'What is wrong, Hortense?'

'That Girandole, he has been clumsy.'

'Tut!' said Hippolyte, to whom lack of dexterity in mating was the unforgivable sin.

'Hercule!' Josephine sat up, her eyes wet, red and full of horror. 'He is dead!'

'What?' exclaimed Hippolyte.

'Dead?' said the Widow Martin.

'All twisted up and wrung dry. I saw him.' She flopped back, started another fit. 'Terrible! Terrible!'

'It will rain soon,' giggled Hyacinth Peuch, exposing teeth like aged falling tombstones. 'Plenty of rain—you'll see!'

'Where is this? demanded Hippolyte Lemaître, frowning down. 'Where? Speak, child!'

'By the meteor stone.'

'Probably she dropped it on him,' was the Widow Martin's muscular suggestion.

'I didn't!' screamed Josephine.

Germaine Joubert arrived, her thin nose twitching, her watery eyes darting this way and that. 'You didn't *what*?'

'She didn't give in to Girandole,' informed the Widow Martin, who always thought of Germaine as something staring beady-eyed around the bend of a sewer. 'She cut out his guts. It was death before dishonour.'

'I didn't!' Josephine shrieked.

'My!' said Germaine, her false hair trying to stand up with the real. '*My*!' She hurried away to be the first to distribute the news.

'Well,' said Hippolyte, doubtfully, 'I will go and telephone Sif. Somebody had better look into this right away.'

The Widow Martin nodded, watched him walk away, Ignoring Josephine, she sat on her doorstep, stroked idly at her upper lip.

'It will rain soon,' repeated Hyacinth Peuch. He snickered,

studying her with his head held lopsided. 'Much rain. You'll see!'

Half an hour later it poured in torrents.

Napoleon Sif, the gendarme from Pontaupis, arrived upon his bicycle within the hour. His cape streamed with water, his socks were damp. He had the bilious wariness of one who is a natural as the victim of some dark conspiracy. Like most folk of Pontaupis, nine kilometres away, he viewed Chateauverne as a sink of iniquity where anything might happen and usually did.

Stamping into the auberge, he shook his cape all over the floor, banged his peaked cap on the back of a chair, mopped his face with a handkerchief.

'What is this I hear? About a dead one?'

A chorus of voices answered him:

'Young Girandole.'

'Curled round and round like a *tire-bouchon*, under a tree, in the rain.'

'Cold and bloodless by the obelisk.'

'Old Rimbaud took Josephine home saying that he will beat the truth out of her.'

'Hortense Martin thinks that—'

'Who cares what Hortense thinks?'

'Will you have a cognac?' asked Jean Pierre Boitavin. 'You are wet enough to have bicycled along the bed of the canal.'

'But certainly.' Sif became mollified. He eyed the glass, gently swirled its contents around, sniffed the bouquet, drank a little and smacked his lips. 'Hah! Let Girandole wait. He can be no damper even if floating.'

'Yes, let him wait,' approved Jean-Pierre. 'Even as I must wait unto the crack of doom. He owed me forty francs. A man has no right to die while owing forty francs. It is indecent.'

Finishing his drink, Sif nodded agreement, having no difficulty in seeing the ethics of this. 'If everyone did it we should all be ruined.' Buttoning his cape, he posed with saturated authority. 'One or two of you had better come with me to show where this debtor has expired.'

A couple volunteered, more from morbid curiosity than any sense of public duty. Going out, they encountered the Abbé Courtot hurrying through the rain. The old priest stopped at the sight of officialdom.

'What brings you here, my son? Nothing serious I hope?'

'Girandole is stiff in the woods.'

'Indeed?' The Abbé shook a sorrowful head. 'Hercule will not like that.'

'No?' Sif stared at him.

'A drunken father is a source of shame.'

'*Young* Girandole,' yelled Sif right in his ear. 'He is *dead*!'

'Dear me!' The Abbé took a startled step backward and massaged his hearing organ. 'How dreadful! Such a nice young fellow. So well behaved.'

Greatly troubled, he peered short-sightedly after them as they disappeared into the dark rain.

Most of the population of Chateauverne viewed the corpse, felt sick in their stomachs and had bad dreams. Excepting Emile Périé and the Widow Martin, both exceptionally hard characters. The brothers Boitavin made a special trip to l'Orient for a truck load of extra cognac.

Two aged, uncertain doctors and Napoleon Sif agreed between them that no body could be so fearfully warped by any human agency and that therefore it would be best to place the blame in the broad, accommodating lap of the Almighty. They gave it forth that Hercule had been cut off in the flower of his youth by a bolt of lightning. It was, they asserted, an act of God, moving in a mysterious way His wonders to perform.

To Girandole the Elder—whose wild oats once had been sown so fast that he had seldom been seen perpendicular, and who now spent his declining years dreaming with relish of bygone helling—it was pointed out that the sins of the fathers shall be paid for by posterity. Which system of justice, in his view, had much to be said for it.

Josephine, already recovered from her shock and looking around for new and vigorous conquerors, was sermonized to the effect that perhaps one minute of modesty had saved her from sharing the fate of her lover.

At the funeral the Abbé Courtot made full and legitimate use of the mournful circumstances, lecturing all and sundry upon various aspects of celestial vengeance, its sureness, its inevitability, and making oblique reference to the less than holy habits of certain parties whom everybody promptly identified as everybody else.

Hercule went down the hole. Napoleon cycled back to Pontaupis. Josephine Rimbaud permitted young Armand Descoules to accompany her in approximately a homeward direction, hoping that somewhere en route he might see fit to offer more than

spiritual consolation. Hyacinth Peuch stayed to help fill the grave, scrabbling the soil with his bare hands and letting saliva drip down with it.

The whole affair became reduced to a matter of gossip with appropriate shoulder-shrugs and gestures. No more than that until six days afterward when the next killing occurred.

Hyacinth Peuch brought the evil news. He shambled up to the little group seated outside the Boitavin hostelry, hung his head sidewise and grimaced at them.

"Much rain soon.'

'Go away, fool,' said one, impatiently.

'Plenty of rain. Wash blood down.' His giggle was squeaky and all slobber-mouthed. 'Laverne's blood.'

'Laverne has no blood,' declared Lemaître, winking at the others.

This was more of an exaggeration than an untruth. Jules Laverne, a tall, gangling, moody character was so emaciated that he was known as *Le Pendu,* the hanging man.

His thin, beaky features bore a fancied resemblance to those of the late Seigneurs of Verne, and this—coupled with his surname—had bred in him the delusion that he had been deprived of his rightful inheritance by some gang of snide lawyers. Jules therefore comported himself at all times with the dour dignity of a diddled duke, made periodic inspections of *his* property by touring the dilapidated Verne estate, and occasionally searched the civil records of nearby towns for an ancient marriage certificate which did not exist, the specific union in which he was interested having taken place only in bed.

'Lots of blood from Laverne,' insisted Hyacinth, making himself sound gluttonous. 'Near the meteor stone.'

'Eh? *Where?*'

'All twisted up like the other one. I saw him.' He dribbled at the recollection of it. 'Rain soon!'

There was no sign of the promised downpour. Thin streamers from the sinking sun spread part way across an otherwise clear sky. Despite this the group stirred uneasily, not liking undue positiveness in an idiot. And besides, if a second one were doomed to be smitten in the plantation, Laverne was as likely a subject as any and likelier than most. He was always mooching around the place, thinking of what might have been. They eyed Hyacinth, gazed at each other.

Before anyone could make remark Germaine Joubert hurried up, her little eyes swift and eager.

'Would you believe it? Incredible!' She paused to build up suspense, then: 'That skinny cast-off Jules Laverne left his bicycle outside Tillie Benoit's cottage *all* night! He didn't go home. Outrageous! What could she possibly see in him? Or he in her? And the blatancy of it, leaving it there like an advertisement of his presence, openly boasting of his misdeeds. If you ask me—'

'Nobody *is* asking you, Gabble-Gob,' assured Hippolyte, who often swore that Germaine could take the heat off a dung-hill.

'Eh? Did I hear aright, Monsieur?'

'You did. Take your wagging tongue elsewhere.'

She tossed an indignant and self-righteous head. 'Permit me to tell you, M. Lemaître, that were it not for the few who are pure—'

"By compulsion rather than by choice,' she said pointedly, and watched her hustle away with nose held high. To the others he opined, 'Tillie Benoit would not smile upon Jules for fifty thousand francs. She is as warm and responsive as a lump of stone. Eventually she will give to the worms what she has denied to men.'

'So?' encouraged one.

'But her cottage is by the path through the plantation. Therefore, I am going to the obelisk. Who comes?'

'I will.'

Another grumbled, 'In that case I might as well share this folly.'

'Rain soon,' reminded Hyacinth Peuch, showing yellow teeth. 'Wash the blood down.'

'Rain, rain, rain,' commented the grumbler. 'Always he speaks of rain. As if we have not had enough.' He spat on the ground vigorously. 'The poor fool listens too much to miserable dirt-diggers who call themselves farmers. Invariably the weather is bringing them to the verge of bankruptcy. They will never be satisfied until they have rain every night and a shower of sewage Sundays. That is all they ask of God: rain and sewage. The *Banque de France* will provide the rest.'

Thunderheads had appeared by the time they reached the inscribed stone: *Ici La Météorite de 1897*. The first drops were falling as they bore Laverne's crumpled figure into the square.

Napoleon Sif had another soaking, as did the two doctors. They mooned over the bizarre shape which appeared to have undergone some weird, unimaginable torment before seeking to establish new claims in another and higher estate. Every bone was

broken, every joint dislocated. The torso had been turned around upon its hips. The head stared with ghastly incongruity over its own spine. The legs had been plaited like strings.

Lightning, ventured Sif, does not strike twice in the same place. One doctor pooh-poohed, saying it was a myth. The other declared that lightning could and did hit ten times in one spot, especially if iron ore lay beneath. Anyway, Laverne's cadaver had been found precisely three metres from the site of Girandole's. The verdict was as before: death from a bolt.

They buried Jules Laverne along with all his futile hopes and idle dreams. Sif returned to Pontaupis. The Boitavins trucked more booze from l'Orient. Hyacinth Peuch stamped dirt into the grave.

The Abbé Courtot spoke solemnly of the sin of aping one's betters, of how pride goes before a fall, of the tinsel tawdriness of worldly treasure. You can't, he asserted, take it with you—which piece of theistic information was translated by the pious Josephine as an authoritative injunction to use it while it is still warm.

The name of Laverne became added to that of Girandole as subject for morbid talk, and neither held any greater significance for forty-eight hours. This is only a short time, the reason for its brevity being that Laverne had not surrendered much juice, so that the third death followed fairly soon.

The very casualness of the next announcement enhanced its horror. It was the early evening of market day, the one occasion of each week when Chateauverne considered itself wide open and roaring.

Emile Périć came picking his way across the square, dodging crates of chickens, stepping over snoring hogs. A giant of a man, hairy-chested, furry-armed, with thick, menacing eyebrows, he was called behind his back and at a safe distance, *L'Encadreur*, the picture-framer. Despite the fact that he was the village blacksmith, this tag of another profession had clung to him since the memorable day when he'd become trapped by his buttocks in an ill-fitting privy and remained there until four rescuers arrived to tear him free. As he was a hard, taciturn man, that long-gone episode was the only matter about which he was sensitive.

Passing a wall shored up by glum drunks, and a fence that served as a perch for a small row of septuagenarian fanny-fans, Emile lumbered heavily into the auberge, signed to Baptiste and rumbled in a hoarse undertone, 'Another!'

Baptiste Boitavin was puzzled, having seen him enter. 'Emile, how can I serve you another when you have not yet had a first?'

'I will have a first now. A double cognac. It will be timely.' Périé's hands made twisting motions as if they were screwing the neck of an invisible chicken. 'There has been another.'

A paleness came into Baptiste's face as he got it this time. Glancing at the other customers he leaned across the bar, lowered his voice, 'Who?'

'Portale.' The hands screwed again. 'Like that. Round and round.' He took a mouthful of cognac. 'Burst open and squeezed dry, like a rotten orange.'

'A-a-a-ah!' Baptiste drew back. 'The telephone!'

'Let us suffer no more cretins from Pontaupis,' suggested Périé. 'The time for fumblers has gone.'

'I will summon the gendarmerie from Vannes. Where is the body? In the plantation?'

'No. I carried it here myself. Limp and flexible as wet string. It is in the chapel. Only the Widow Martin saw me.' He remained there, leaning on the bar, nursing his drink and looking casual until Baptiste returned from the telephone and threw him a nod. His answering shrug meant, 'Oh, well, that is that!' before he tramped out and went to his forge for a three-kilo hammer to lay by his bed.

For some mysterious reason that will never be solved, the first response to Baptiste's appeal for aid came in the form of an excited fire-squad with one twelve-metre ladder and three multiple pumps. Having cut the record time from Vannes by most of a minute, this circus arrived in the square with an uproarious clamour of bells and gongs, scattering chickens, ducks, cabbages and gossipers. At once Chateauverne was in a turmoil, as willing helpers ran in all directions seeking the non-existent conflagration. Among certain inebriates there was some talk of startling a suitable blaze to justify the expense and *élan* of the visit.

An hour later, after much shouting, arguing, waving of hands and repeated telephone calls to Vannes, the fire-fighters withdrew, taking with them three bottles of sour wine and earnest requests not to try Pontaupis, which ought to have been razed to the ground long ago.

Less spectacularly, a carload of gendarmes sneaked down a side-lane, pulled up outside the chapel. They went inside. Germaine Joubert saw them, drew others with her to the door. News soon began to fly from mouth to mouth, sobering the village.

'A third one.'

'Like the others.'

'It is Portale.'

They were shocked even though this did not come quite so close to their own doorsteps, for Magnifico Portale was not a native of Chateauverne. Of foreign extraction, believed to be Iberian, he had wandered the countryside for years, earning a precarious living with the aid of a face full of love and a heart full of larceny. It was freely rumoured that Magnifico had also fathered seventeen children, eight of them by his wife. Despite this copulatory nonchalance, he was held in some small measure of esteem because, having brought joy to the formerly childless, this sin was no more than Christian charity.

The gendarmes took Magnifico away, more violently contorted than ever he'd been in life. The following mid-day they returned with long boxes, spades, and an official paper full of whereases and heretofores. They dug up Girandole and Laverne, packed them, drove them away to Vannes.

By this time Chateauverne had decided that twice is enough and three times too much. The superb marksmanship of lightning-bolts strained the credulity, especially seeing that nothing similar had occurred within living memory. A murderer must be on the loose, a maniac, an assassin.

Up went the oak shutters, Emile Périé's forge huffed and puffed and produced hammering noises as it strove to cope with a sudden boom in bigger and better bolts and bars. Armand Descoules had the streets to himself after eight-thirty, was compelled to court Josephine within stone's throw of her door, and had to postpone his romantic intention of taking what little was left of her all.

On the fourth night after the bodies had been taken to Vannes, with speculation still rife and fear still stalking the darker lanes, Baptiste Boitavin came to a decision.

'This savage has slaughtered only by night and in the plantation. That is a game at which two can play.' He produced a heavy double-barrelled gun. 'Let us seek him and put an end to him.'

'An excellent idea,' approved Hippolyte Lemaître. 'They slumber in Vannnes with the porcine contentment of those well-fattened upon taxes. We could all be garrotted one at a time in alphabetical order before they awoke. We must take action ourselves.'

There were murmurs of agreement. Only Timothée Clotaire, the morbid sexton from the Eglise, saw fit to oppose. He was the

sort of man who invariably has a problem ready for every solution.

'What if this killer is not a human being?'

'We know he is not. He is inhuman.' Baptiste spat on the floor. 'Death to him!'

'What if he is non-human, such as a mad gorilla?'

'It is all the same. We shall blow him apart.'

'Or perhaps a rogue elephant escaped from the *Cirque Nationale*?' Timothée persisted. His look reduced Baptiste's gun to matchstick size as mentally he measured it against an elephant.

It can be a twenty-metre boa-constrictor for all I care,' said Baptiste stoutly. He shouldered his weapon. 'I am ready. Who else is ready to go with me?'

Ten of them went out, brought back seven shotguns, one target pistol, one antique cutlass and one oak bludgeon formidably studded with brass nails. Filled with martial ferocity, this group set forth, followed at a distance by Hyacinth Peuch, curious and yellow-toothed.

For three hours they beat to and fro through the woods, hallooing to each other and urinating at frequent intervals, disturbing the owls and rabbits but sighting nothing maniacal or monstrous. One by one they gave up and went home, each man according to the measure of his patience.

At three o'clock in the morning Jean-Pierre Boitavin pummelled and thumped upon Hippolyte Lemaître's door, aroused him from bed.

'Ah, so! You are there! Are all the others back?'

'Probably. Hippolyte rubbed his eyes, too stupid with sleep to feel irritation. 'What is the matter, Jean-Pierre?'

'Where is Baptiste?'

'He has not returned?' Hippolyte bleared at his clock, saw the lateness of the hour, was jerked into immediate wakefulness. He threw down a key. 'Come inside and wait while I dress. We must seek Baptiste.'

The found him exactly where they had expected, though neither had been willing to admit it to the other. Near the meteor stone, his undischarged weapon beside a cold hand. He was scarcely recognizable.

A long box arrived from Vannes and bore Baptiste away under the inquisitive gaze of Roger Corbeau, a tousle-haired youngster of twelve. Roger was by nature so unappreciative of danger, even when it breathed down his neck, that already he had broken four

bones, been stitched seven times, and had his life despaired of twice.

This was not because he was stuffed with foolhardy courage so much as the plain dumbness of the accident-prone. In other words, he had something in common with Hyacinth Peuch, only it was not so far developed. Among local connoisseurs of disaster, it was generally agreed that Roger was not long for this world because Jesus wanted him for a sunbeam.

In this respect the oracles were dead on the beam. Roger went obediently to bed, escaped via a dormer window, made straight for the plantation with the object of seeing for himself how it was done. His enthusiasm might have evaporated within the hour had he been kept waiting that long, but characteristically he picked a moment when service was prompt and efficient. In due course he was sought, discovered, scraped up and driven to Vannes in a short container, under a steady downpour.

Two gendarmes with loaded carbines remained to patrol the plantation night-times. Nothing happened in the next ten days, during which the weather stayed consistently warm and fine. Though bored with their task they kept dutifully to it, hearing nothing suspicious, seeing no cause for alarm.

At ten-twenty in the evening of the eleventh night, one of them went to Tillie Benoit's cottage for the coffee she prepared by official arrangement. He carried the can moodily, for the atmosphere had grown cold and indicative of coming rain. Moreover, he felt that the hot drinks could have been dispensed by someone comelier and more sociable than Tillie. She was a thin and frigid female who doled out the stuff as if she were conferring favours on lepers.

Nevertheless, he dallied with Tillie as long as he could, engaging her in conversation full of high morals and low purposes, keeping at her with the rugged determination of one who views every fortress as a challenge to conquest and, in any case, has to maintain a carefully cultivated reputation for being hotter than a tomcat full of curry.

It was almost an hour before he returned, defeated. Reaching the obelisk, he stared around.

'Marcel!'

Silence.

'*Marcel!*'

No response.

Loudly and with a slight quaver, 'MARCEL!'

A cool wind whispered through the trees. There was an acrid scent, faint but familiar and disturbing. He sniffed twice, thrice, trying to remember.

Blood!

The can dropped from his left hand, the carbine from his right. Abandoning Marcel, he whirled around and ran as he had never run before.

Forty men of the first field company of the 23me. Infantry of the Line marched in next afternoon, stationed themselves around the plantation with strict orders to permit no entry. A newspaper reporter came from l'Orient, was sent by the Widow Martin in feckless pursuit of an imaginary massacre in Pontaupis, where one was long overdue. M. le Préfect de Morbihan visited Chateauverne in person, toured it three minutes, went away.

The next week was uneventful. Tillie Benoit gave the brush-off to forty soldiers, all of whom decided that their little dog mascot had a similar mother. M. le Capitaine, their commanding officer, had no opinion on this matter, he being well satisfied with an address where he could perform those carpet calisthenics that were necessary to a warrior's health and spirits.

So far as anyone could discern, little else was being done about successive tragedies, but on the evening of Thursday a person presented himself at the auberge. He was a small, slight man, dapper, with a neat white goatee beard and peculiarly cold blue eyes.

'Are you Jean-Pierre Boitavin?'

'Yes, Monsieur.'

The other produced a card.

Georges Fournier, Inspecteur. Sûreté Générale.

'Ah, the Sûreté!' said Jean-Pierre, overwhelmed. 'It is not necessary to ask what brings you here.'

Inspector Fournier nodded. 'I have already cross-examined a number of people: the Abbé Courtot, Périé, Lemaître, Madame Martin and others. All those whose information might be helpful. Only two names remain on my list: yours and'—he took out a little notebook and consulted it—'one Hyacinth Peuch.' The icy eyes bored into Jean-Pierre. 'Kindly recite all you know of these affairs.'

Obediently, Jean-Pierre recounted events with as much detail as he could bring to mind.

'It is the same story,' commented Fournier. 'Now, where is this Peuch? Where might he be found?'

'Right outside.' Jean-Pierre pointed into the square. 'That is he, the afflicted one playing with cabbage stalks.'

'So! Is he capable of speech?'

'But certainly, Monsieur. It is only that he is shy of strangers.' He thought a moment. 'I will summon him here and give him a generous cognac. We will wait while it fumes through his bowels. Then you may buy him another. They will have a fraternal effect. After two cognacs he will kiss you upon the forehead with lavish distribution of sputum.'

'Call him,' ordered Fournier, accustomed to suffering in the line of duty.

Hyacinth came in with the drag-legged, lopsided gait of the half-witted. He absorbed a cognac slowly, suspiciously, having learned from village pranksters to beware those who come bearing gifts.

'Hyacinth knows when it will rain,' remarked Jean-Pierre, flattering the tippler to put him at ease. 'If he says it will, it does. After each death he promised that the angels would weep, and they did!'

'Indeed?' Fournier studied the graveyard aspect of Hyacinth's molars. 'Why should it rain after death?'

'Wash the blood down,' informed Hyacinth. Finishing the cognac, he smacked thick lips, giggled.

'Wash it down where?'

'Into the roots.'

'Ah, yes, the roots,' agreed Fournier. He raised an inquiring eyebrow. 'And which roots may these be?'

'The tree's.' Hyacinth mooned at his empty glass.

'Give him another,' Fournier ordered Jean-Pierre. 'Now Monsieur Peuch, I am immensely interested in trees. Of which tree do you speak?'

Manifestly overcome by being addressed as Monsieur Peuch, the half-wit stammered, 'The—the big one that squeezes rabbits.'

A sharp gleam became visible in Fournier's eyes as he asked, 'You have actually *seen* it do that?'

Hyacinth did not reply.

'Show me *how* it did it,' invited Fournier, patiently.

'Go on, show the gentleman,' Jean-Pierre encouraged. 'They have never seen or heard of such a thing in Paris.'

With some reluctance, Hyacinth put down his glass, stood up, extended both arms stiffly above his head, lifted his face to stare at the ceiling.

'Like this all day,' he informed. 'Cannot move because of the light, the terrible light. But at night—'

'Well?'

'Things run over roots, things with blood.'

'Go on!' urged Fournier.

'Then . . .' He took a deep breath. His rigid upraised arms trembled down their length. Suddenly he swept them toward his toes, bringing them down in a swift arc with all the force he could command. His fingers grabbed at the floor. The arms arose as his body straightened. He stood before them in ghastly imbecility, gurgling with pleasure as his hands made screwing motions and shook imaginary blood over his feet.

'Then soon,' he said, 'it rains.'

Jean-Pierre tilted the cognac bottle. 'I must have one myself.' He swilled it down, stared at Hyacinth. 'A tree! Name of a dog! How can there be such a tree?'

'And you have seen rabbits so killed?' said Fournier. 'Often? For long?'

'Four-five-six years. Maybe more. I don't know.' Hyacinth raised a hand level with his head. 'Since the tree was as big as me.'

'Does this happen frequently?' persisted Fournier.

'Only when it is dark and rain is coming,' said Hyacinth, wise in the ways of the eerie. 'No rain, no kill.'

Fournier did not bother to inquire why the other had said nothing of this before now. He knew the answer: a fool soon learns not to be loud in his folly.

'You will take us to this tree?'

'Yes, Monsieur.'

In gathering darkness, the deadly growth looked little different from other trees standing nearby. Just a thick, warty trunk with upraised limbs and a mass of broad, fleshy leaves. It was exactly eight metres from the obelisk.

Forty soldiers made an armed and leery ring around it, while Inspector Fournier carefully surveyed what could be seen in the light of half-a-dozen lanterns.

'You are certain this is the vegetable assassin?'

'Of a verity, Monsieur,' asserted Hyacinth, pleased to find himself the centre of attention without being mocked.

'There are no others?'

'No, Monsieur.'

'The tale is utter folly,' scoffed M. le Capitaine, thwarted in his design to spend that night snatching the village school-marm's intangibles. He strode martially through the ring, rapped his cane

upon the hard trunk, spoke with authority. 'No vegetable has sufficient sensitivity or speed of reaction. Neither can its limbs have any elasticity, therefore—'

His last word was cast away in an outward gust of wind and a tremendous *swi-i-i-ish*! as half-a-dozen great branches shot down and got him. Up he soared into mid-air, being wrung out like a damp dishcloth as he went. Not a scream came from him, not a cry. There were no sounds other than those of cracking bones, bursting flesh and the patter-patter of glutinous droplets beneath.

The branches gave a final jerk which tossed the body away, then rose to their former position. Silent, impassive, satisfied, the tree stood in the dark.

Muttering grim profanities, someone cast the light of his lantern over the body. M. le Capitaine was in the pink of condition.

'Rain soon,' promised Hyacinth Peuch.

Fournier came to life like one emerging from a bad dream. He took command with swiftly barked orders.

'Take this dead one away, right out of reach. Bring wood, faggots, twigs, oil, anything burnable. Throw it toward this monster. Be careful—do not go too near yourselves. Hurry, idiots, hurry!'

They burst into a frenzy of activity. Within a short time a pyramid of flung fuel had grown until it reached the lowermost branches. Oil commandeered from Tillie Benoit's lamps and stoves was tossed upon it. Fournier applied the flame in person. Fire caught, flickered, hesitated, suddenly roared to the heavens.

At that point the tree began to thrash around like a mad thing, scattering sparks and burning brands in all directions, full of violent and horrible life. They showed it no mercy. More and more fuel piled onto the flames, building up the pyre until the trunk of an adjacent tree exploded under pressure of boiling sap.

With the dawn there was nothing left but a circle of grey ash, from beneath which they dug charred remnants of roots and made a smaller fire of those. At ten o'clock, tired, dirty, dishevelled, they marched back to the square.

Fournier entered the auberge, washed, ordered breakfast. 'It was a tree, a blood-drinking growth from none can guess where. I think that meteor brought with it a seed from a place that knows no light.' He pondered a little while, ended, 'Well, we have seen the last of this vampire. Chateauverne will be troubled no more.'

'I am not so sanguine, Monsieur,' offered Jean-Pierre. 'In Chateauverne, if one is not being strangled or used for bouillon, another is being robbed of forty francs, or another is fastened to his throne like a hairy and impotent emperor.' He reached for a bottle. 'You will have a cognac, perhaps?'

'But certainly.'

The remainder has yet to be told, may never be told. A living speck came from the far reaches of space, took root near Chateauverne. Being phototropic, it posed by day like one hypnotized, but by night it grew and moved and drank blood and grew again until it was destroyed.

Hyacinth Peuch, being simple, got no credit whatsoever. Indeed, he was severely criticized for holding his tongue so long, despite the fact that none would have taken note if he had permitted it to wag.

Even an idiot can be sensitive, which is why he continued to invite no insults the following Spring. Returning from a certain secluded spot where with the aid of adequate if cross-eyed sight he sometimes gained instruction in the twin arts of courtship and conquest, he saw a hairy chestnut inching across his path.

It was a small, brown, shiny thing with trembling cilia. Moving slowly, laboriously, it got over the path, across the grass verge, tumbled helplessly down one side of a ditch, climbed up the other, settled itself into the swell of the bank. There, with cilia feebly waving, it buried itself from sight.

At odd times months apart he came back to this spot, but the bank spurted new growths lavishly, and there was no way of telling the native from the alien. The end of October arrived before he noticed one day under a metre-high shrub a dead mouse, twisted, wrinkled and dry.

Chateauverne received fair warning in the form of two words spoken to the Widow Martin.

'Rain soon.' He chuckled with sloppy gobbling sounds, ogling her sidewise and swinging a drip from his nose.

Now the Widow Martin—being a healthy, vigorous woman conscious of her solitary state—was quietly and innocently enjoying her own desires. To her, the unappetizing spectacle of Hyacinth was as welcome as that of a dead rat at a banquet.

So she growled, 'Go away, oaf!' and fidgeted her hungry backside and forgot him.

With a Blunt Instrument

MRS. BANSTEAD squatted like an immense bullfrog, stared grimly across the big black desk and said, 'I want to be a widow.'

'Really!' Digger Kelly registered interest by raising a sardonic eyebrow. His face was long and leathery, his eyes cold, blue and shrewd, his grin both hard and mirthless. 'How much is he carrying?'

'Five thousand dollars.' Her broad, flat face quirked at mention of the sum. 'I've been paying for seven years, and if something isn't done damn quick, I'll go on paying for another forty. I'd rather have his money than his company.'

'I'm sure you would.' Again the grin. 'You have my sincere sympathy.' He watched her speculatively. She stared back at him with the blatant, unwinking gaze of a fat basilisk. 'You know my terms—fifty-fifty?' She nodded. 'And what leads you to suppose that I can -er be of assistance to you in this respect?'

'You were recommended,' she told him, her voice a hoarse monotone, 'by my sister, Melissa Gates.'

'Ah!' Opening a drawer, Kelly raked through a file, extracted some papers. He studied them in silence, then, 'Yes, Mrs. Gates provided my sixteenth case. A very successful one, even though I say so myself. Nice and smooth and satisfactory in every way. I attended the burial.' Carefully he replaced the papers.

'Aren't you risking a length of hemp with those documents around?' Mrs. Banstead's devilish tranquillity was disturbed. Her great repulsive bosom heaved with her breathing.

'No.' He grinned at her again, his cold eyes running over her bulging shapelessness. Two hundred and fifty pounds, he guessed —she wouldn't need more than seven feet of rope. 'They record nothing of use to anyone but me.'

They didn't either. Not even Dan Fletcher could use them effectively, supposing that he'd get his long, thin, inquisitive fingers on them. Dan Fletcher needed watching all the same. Better keep strictly to his plan of doing twenty-five before skipping. Twenty-five was risk enough in a town this size. In fact, twenty-five came dangerously close to inserting a curious

factor in Fletcher's infernal mathematics. Fletcher played with numbers like a maestro fingering the strings of a harp, and he was liable to start tuning up immediately he sensed a discord.

'The sum you have mentioned, Mrs. Banstead,' he said smoothly, 'is low, very low. I must tell you frankly that I'm hardly enamoured of the proposition.' Inserting strong strangler's thumbs in the armholes of his vest, he pursed his lips doubtfully.

She said, in a funereal monotone, 'I'm paying rates upped twenty per cent. It buys me a clause: I get twelve thousand if the hairy louse goes before the age of forty-eight.'

'Of natural causes, of course?' hazarded Kelly.

'Oh natural causes,' she confirmed.

'That makes a considerable difference.' Extracting a thumb, he pressed a stud on the ebony desk. A dwarf answered. The dwarf was squat, pot-bellied, black-skinned, and he wore a suit of sloppy clothes as if reluctantly conforming to an insane custom. 'This,' said Kelly, 'is Mrs. Banstead, our latest client.'

The dwarf emitted a piglike grunt, glowered at her with sullen eyes. There was something weirdly fundamental about him, something totally out of place—like a Hottentot in a penthouse. Mrs. Banstead vaguely wondered if the creature *was* a Hottentot. He was animal, and she could smell him from where she sat, a pungent goatish smell. She didn't like him.

Kelly gabbled at the dwarf in a strange language composed of snorts and grunts. The dwarf went out.

'The matter will be dealt with,' said Kelly. He stood up, his long, wiry figure topping six feet. His manner indicated that the interview was at an end.

'But—'

'The agreement between us,' he responded, sensing her question, 'remains unwritten. In due time you will pay me.' He leaned across the desk, smiled with the air of a businessman who has just pulled a satisfactory deal, then said, very slowly and very deliberately, 'God help you if you don't!'

Mrs. Banstead heaved her great form erect. Now that it was all arranged, she felt shaken. But Melissa had got away with it, so why shouldn't she? Besides, this hex doctor fairly radiated confidence. She calmed herself as she walked ponderously to the door.

With her hand on the handle, she asked, 'When . . . when will it be?'

'In six to eight weeks' time.' Kelly sat down again, frowned like a busy man bothered by superfluous questions. 'The twenty-fifth,'

he murmured after she had gone. His hard eyes bored at the wall. 'Providing Fletcher suspects nothing, I can get out and start again elsewhere. Damn Fletcher!' He continued to stare at the wall for some time. Then he rang the bell, and the dwarf came back.

'Charlie,' he said, 'I've got a job for you.' He lapsed into a torrent of outlandish gutturals. The dwarf listened without emotion, grunting occasionally.

Mason sighed resignedly, suppressed a yawn, and said, 'You may be right and you may be wrong. I wouldn't know. But if you ask me, I'd say you've either got a nasty mind, or else you place too much faith in statistics. You're mathematics mad!'

'Did you ever hear,' demanded Dan Fletcher, 'of any insurance company that didn't do business upon a statistical basis?' He didn't wait for a reply. His clenched fist landed with a thump on Mason's desk, and a gob of that worthy's ink leaped from the pot and made an unsightly splash. 'No,' he said emphatically.

Finding the blotter, Mason dabbed gloomily at the smear and said, 'I see no cause to start a smelling out of witches just because there's a peak in the graph. I've seen dozens of graphs in my time, and most of them had peaks. They get dragged down to average by equally periodic dips.' He put away the blotter, eyed Fletcher's fist, cautiously closed the lid of the inkpot. 'Sinkers compensate for soarers if you wait long enough for nature to take its course. So relax, be soothed. Peace be upon you.'

'Twenty-four,' persisted Dan Fletcher irefully. 'Twenty-four policies that are stinkers. Either someone has blundered or we've been made suckers.' Finding a chair, he planted his broad beam upon it, his legs braced as if to bring him upright in a flash. His bold gaze examined Mason until that person began to fidget. 'Ever seen our statistical morgue at head office?'

'Can't say that I have,' admitted the other reluctantly.

'Go up and see it sometime,' invited Fletcher. 'It holds thousands upon thousands of records going back for a hundred and forty years. It is a mathematical whiz. Given certain of the necessary details and applying them to our mathematical data, I could tell you your expectation of life correctly to within two years. What's more, I could also give you decimal-pointed percentages covering possibilities of intervention by accidents of any imaginable kind.' He got up, walked around restlessly. 'As you well know—or ought to—policies aren't based on guesswork. They're based on data that doesn't cover and can't cover freak

events and rare epidemics, but are good enough to eliminate the possibility of twenty-four stinkers in a row.'

'I know you're the company's official trouble-shooter,' said Mason feebly, 'but how in hell can you shoot the peak off a graph? If twenty-four geeziks pop off fifteen to thirty years too early, and if twenty-four reputable medicos swear that their days had properly dawned, what can you do about it? Can you order a couple of dozen exhumations on the strength of a statistical flaw?'

'A grand total of three hundred thousand smackers is more than a statistical flaw.'

'Yes, but all the deaths were natural. If a couple of them had been done in with the usual blunt instrument, I'd be leery myself. But when you get clean certificates, what else can you do but pay up with a smile and hold your trap?'

'You can mooch around,' said Dan Fletcher darkly. He caught Mason napping, walloped a spurt of ink from the other pot which had been left open. '*I'm* going to mooch around. Something smells, and I'm going to find it.'

This was the house. The sixteenth down Dan's list; he'd picked it at random—one had to start somewhere if one were going to get anywhere. Running his finger down the list, he checked up on the name: Mrs. Maisie Curtin. The board in the foyer said she nested on the fifth floor.

Using the elevator, Dan Fletcher slipped the operator a five-spot and said, 'This Curtin woman—can you give me a brief résumé of her life?'

'A floozie.' The operator magicked the note away, gave Fletcher a respectful look. 'Her old man kicked the bucket about six months back, and she collected plenty on him. Did she weep for him—bah!' His sniff was loud and contemptuous. 'Her and Curtin never got along. He liked books and things. She was fond of boys and booze. Now she's setting the pace.'

'Making the play, eh?'

'I'll say!' The elevator stopped with a rubbery bounce. 'Curtin never did anybody any harm, and he was mighty good to me.' He opened the gate, let Fletcher out. 'But he faded away. I watched him sinking week after week. Then he died.' He struck his head out and added, 'Second on the left, and thanks, mister!'

Dan Fletcher thumbed the button on the door indicated. Short, swift steps sounded the other side, and the woman who opened the door was very small, very blonde, with wide blue eyes. She

was well rounded, well lipsticked, and made a fair job of looking like a foolish virgin.

'If you're selling something,' she said in a babyish voice, 'you can damn well—oh!' Her voice changed as her blue eyes took in Dan's craggy features, broad, trim figure, and neatly pressed suit. The eyes became interested and calculating. 'Come in,' she invited, standing aside.

He entered, his hat in his hand. 'Mrs. Curtin?' he asked. She nodded, still weighing him up speculatively. 'My name's Dan Fletcher.'

'It's a pleasure,' she said. She studied him like a housewife about to buy a hunk of beef. 'Won't you be seated—er—Mr. Fletcher?' He sat, stared around the room. It was a picture of garish opulence. Mrs. Curtin opened a cocktail cabinet, found a flask and two glasses. 'Like a drink?' She eyed him again, deliberately coy.

'No thanks, Mrs. Curtin.' He noted that she had not yet asked his business. Watching her carefully, he added, 'I've come around from the Atlantic & General Assurance Co.'

She didn't drop a glass, but he saw her knuckles whiten as her grip closed, and he did not miss the sudden, unfathomable expression that sprang into her eyes. Was it fear, or what?

'Indeed,' she murmured after a long silence. Her interest in him seemed to have changed suddenly. Putting down the flask and the glasses, she played around with her hands as if she didn't quite know what to do with them. Her eyes were on him all the time.

He let her get on with it, curious to see how she'd make the conversation. She fidgeted a bit more, then reclaimed one of the glasses and poured herself a drink. It was a stiff one, Fletcher noted, a good, full-sized seadog's snifter, and she poured it into her baby face as if it were far from being the first and equally far from being the last.

The drink crawled around her innards and did things to her, including a reddening of her face. 'Go on,' she ordered, tipping another into the glass.

'It's about the policy of your late husband, Robert Curtin,' Fletcher went on cautiously.

Downing the second one, she stood up and said, 'What of it?' Her voice had altered now—it was harsh and slightly bellicose.

'The company,' lied Fletcher, 'is associated with the Eastern Investment Corp., whom I represent. Frankly, for the sake of good will and hope of further business, we are prepared to offer

excellent advice and undertake financial dealings on behalf of clients who have—'

'Oh,' she interrupted, 'so you're after my twenty-five thousand bucks.' She smacked down the glass, jammed small fists on prominent hips, and glared indignantly. 'No soap—get out!'

'Very well, Mrs. Curtin.' With a resigned sigh, Dan Fletcher found his hat. 'You will understand, I hope, that we waited a decent time before approaching you, that we've no desire to bother you unduly, and that we only wish to retain the good will of clients.'

'When I get a load of money,' she told him, 'I know what to do with it. You're wasting your time, mister. Now scram!'

Pausing by the door, he surveyed her again, then said, 'The assistance that we are always glad to give may not interest you, Mrs. Curtin, but possibly it may be welcome to others whom you can recommend. In such cases we would, of course, follow the usual practice of paying you—er— a commission on any business you introduce.'

'Well,' she responded thoughtfully. The angry light died slowly from her eyes. 'If there's any more to be got, I guess I can use it.' She thought awhile, then stared him in the face. 'You won't get a damn cent of mine, see? But if this commission stunt of yours is on the up and up, I reckon I can give you a couple of names.'

'Thank you, Mrs. Curtin,' he answered with deceitful humility. 'Our integrity is above reproach.'

'It'd better be!' She scribbled a note, gave it to him. He saw her reaching for the glass again as he went out.

Downstairs, he looked at the note. It bore three names and addresses. Then he looked at his list, found the three among the twenty-four thereon, carefully put a tick against each.

'Now how, ' he asked himself, 'in the name of all that's holy, does it come about that one of the queers knows three of the others?' Then he phoned Mason.

Melissa Gates was a very different type from the Curtin woman, red-haired, peaky-faced, shrewish. If features betrayed character, hers was nosy and suspicious.

'Who sent you round?' she asked.

'Mrs. Curtin,' Dan Fletcher told her. 'She thought you might be interested.'

'Oh, she did, did she?' She rubbed thin, blue-lined hands on her pinafore, sniffed audibly. 'What's she getting out of it?'

'I'm afraid I don't understand you, Mrs. Gates.'

'Never mind. I know her, and she knows me. That woman wouldn't buy anything outside of a bottle and maybe a perm for her peroxided mop. If I was to tell you—' She checked herself, sniffed again, and said, 'All right, say what you've got to say.'

'I thought you and Mrs. Curtin were friends,' prompted Fletcher.

'So we are, but that doesn't alter my opinion of her.' She sat down, peered at her visitor with ratlike eyes. 'Did she let you invest her money?'

'As a matter of fact, she didn't.'

'I guessed not. She'll play around until she hooks a good one. Then she'll bury him for plenty. Never satisfied, that's her! One of these days she'll—' She checked herself again, seeing the look on Dan Fletcher's face. Hurriedly she added, 'Maisie Curtin's the sort who goes after wealthy old men.'

'I see,' said Fletcher doubtfully.

'Anyway, I've hung on to my dough,' continued Melissa Gates, sniffing her satisfaction. She pursed thin lips, stared at him beadily, like a rodent peering round the bend of a sewer. 'And I'm still sticking to it. Twelve grand's a lot of money, more'n I ever had before. Some day I may need it—quick!' She emitted a shrill cackle. 'That's where some of them'll be mighty sorry they poured it down the sink.'

'Who'll be mighty sorry?' Dan Fletcher thrust.

'Why . . . why'—she searched for words, suddenly wary—'those who throw dough away and live to regret it.'

'The preventing of which is precisely my business.'

She went to the door, her wariness and suspicion strengthening to the verge of alarm. She licked thin lips as she looked at him, her shifty eyes silently cursing her ready tongue.

'Sorry you've wasted your time.' Opening the door, she waited for him to go.

Outside the door he took a long shot and said easily, 'Ah, well, there's always the—er—others. Mrs. Curtin also recommended a Mrs. Schultze. Do you think she's a likely prospect?'

'Maisie's a loudmouth,' snapped Mrs. Gates positively. 'And Lucy Schultze is a screwball. Go pound your dogs and find out. It's no business of mine.' With that she slammed the door.

Dan Fletcher went down the block and round the corner. He consulted his list once more. The name of Lucy Schultze, which he'd raked from his memory, stood fourth from the bottom.

'Now,' he muttered, his brow corrugated with a frown, 'that Curtin dame definitely did *not* mention Schultze. Yet Gates knew

her, called her Lucy, and acted as if Curtin knew her also.' He tipped his hat on the back of his head. 'The way things are shaping, it looks like the whole damn bunch know one another.'

Entering a telephone booth, he dialled a number. 'That the Bodin Agency? This is Fletcher of the A & G. I want a couple of good operatives to help me dig out some routine data. What've you got in stock that can third-degree with tact and gentlemanly seemliness?' He grinned as the other voice gabbled back at him. 'Yes, at once. I'll wait for them here.' Giving the location, he pronged the receiver. Then he strolled to the curb, lit a cigarette and waited.

Banstead was a muscle-bound individual with a barrel chest, broad jowls, and big arms lush with black hair. Once he'd been a logger up in Canada, but now was bidding fair to end his days as a loud noise in wholesale timber. Another twenty years might do it.

There had been a few tough episodes in his horny-handed past, enough of them to make him feel well able to take care of himself. He wasn't superstitious. He'd walk under ladders, stare at the new moon or spill salt without a single qualm. Nevertheless, he didn't like the pair of guys at the next table. They gave him the creeps.

The big café was half full, and the offending pair particularly prominent. A subtle something about their manner suggested less interest in food than in Banstead. He'd never seen either of them before, had no yearning ever to see either of them again.

One of the pair was a tall, lean, athletic guy with the hard, tanned complexion of a roughrider. Only his eyes were abnormal; they were more intent and colder than a snake's.

The other resembled nothing that Banstead had ever seen. He was a black-skinned dwarf, wrinkled, slightly pot-bellied and had the sharp, uneasy eyes of a nervous monkey. His clothes looked like they'd been thrown at him and stuck where they touched.

A more ill-assorted pair it would be impossible to conceive, but there they were, in company, an elusive bond of union between them. Banstead could sense this bond and instinctively felt that he should be able to identify it. But he couldn't. The tall guy, he reckoned, was not an American, and his companion was not a Negro. These two negatives ought to make a positive, but the quietly observing Banstead didn't know enough about racial types to put a finger on this pair.

Stolidly he dug into his hunk of pie. The tall cowboy was too

slick to watch him openly, but the other was glaring at him as if at long last he'd tracked down the infidel who'd stolen the green eye of his little yellow god. There was an eerie quality in that glare, a quality that was neither animosity nor downright hatred, but rather vague and fundamental—like a primitive threat from the dawn of time.

Finishing, Banstead got up, made his way out. He favoured the dwarf with a stare of challenge as he passed, got in return a fierce, unwavering gaze that caused tickling sensations in the region of his kidneys. For two pins the black runt would carve him apart.

'A returned explorer and an uncaged cannibal,' Banstead hazarded as he got outside.

Glancing back through the plate-glass windows at the brightly illuminated interior, he saw the weird couple leave their seats. He summoned a taxi, watched the rear-view mirror as the machine purred down the street. The mysterious pair came out of the café, took a yellow-top and followed. He scowled to himself, directed his driver around the block, lost the shadowing machine, but was still vaguely suspicious.

The two had not reappeared by the time he got near home, and already he was accusing himself of giving way to his nerves. In the night-time gloom, there was an empty yellow-top standing around the corner two hundred yards from his destination, but he gave it no more than a glance. A big green automobile was waiting farther down the street, and he studied that with greater interest, since it was parked outside the entrance to the long drive leading to his house. A broad-shouldered, well-dressed individual was lounging near the green car as Banstead came up.

Getting out of his taxi, Banstead paid the driver, gazed belligerently at the waiting onlooker, started up the path. Swift footsteps came after him; he whirled to face his pursuer, his bulldog jaw sticking out pugnaciously. It was the broad-shouldered man.

In a pleasant voice, the other said, 'Mr. Banstead, I believe?'

'Correct.'

'I just missed you at your office and had to catch you here. My name's Fletcher. Dan Fletcher. I represent the Atlantic & General Assurance Co.'

'I'm not interested,' said Banstead curtly. 'Moreover, I'm a busy man and haven't time to discuss taking out a policy even if I had the inclination—which I haven't.' He jerked his head to indicate

the thin edge of the moon now riding high. 'This is a hell of a time to go chasing prospects.'

'I'm not out to sell you anything,' replied Dan Fletcher evenly. His keen eyes noted the underlying toughness of Banstead's features. 'All I want is a brief talk with you, in private, about a very delicate matter.'

'Ho!' scoffed Banstead derisively. 'I know that gag. It's in those courses on super-salesmanship you get by mail. Method No. 4. The approach oblique.'

'All right,' retorted Fletcher quietly. 'Have it your own way. What I'm out to do is to prevent crime and save money. I don't like the notion of dishing out several thousand smackers across your dead body.'

'No,' agreed Banstead. 'I'll bet you don't!' His laugh was a deep rumble as he turned and walked away. On the third step his advancing foot stopped, he came swiftly about and snapped, 'What? What was that you just said?'

'I'll explain in private, and that doesn't mean out here in the open.'

Banstead looked around. The trees along the gloomy drive rustled sibilantly and ragged clouds drifted across the moon. His wife, her yapping mother, two maids, the cook, and probably the shrewish Melissa Gates would be snooping around the house. But he wasn't going back to town at this time of night.

'I'll give you ten minutes in your car,' he decided, 'and you'd better make it interesting.'

Dan Fletcher hesitated. 'O.K.' They got in. Banstead settled himself comfortably in a corner. Fletcher brought out his papers and proceeded to explain.

'So after that, with the help of some Bodin operatives, I discovered that all the people on this list know some of the other people on it, and that there is a traceable link from one to the other. There are three cases not listed, which occur within the same period, but since they do not link with any of these, and especially since they conform to the mathematical data for such a period, I accept them as genuine claims. But these on the list are not genuine.'

'You're trying to invent trouble,' pooh-poohed Banstead. 'Graphs and figures can be made to mean anything. Besides, where do I come in? I'm not on that list of yours. D'you think I've bumped the lot?'

'If you'll give me time, I'll explain where you come in,' said

Fletcher. 'After I'd obtained this data, and analyzed it, I took the next logical step.'

'What was that?'

'I extracted all local policies still open for considerable sums and, with the help of the operatives, tried to extend the links. Of seventeen policyholders, I found only one having even the slightest connection with people on this list.' He looked the other straight in the eyes. 'That one was Mrs. Banstead.'

'What, Josephine?' He laughed harshly. 'Scheming to collect on me? That fat frump wouldn't have the guts!'

'So that's how it is,' thought Fletcher, his confidence rising considerably. Bluntly, he said to his sardonically amused listener, 'I'll admit I'm only following my nose, but if figures mean anything—and I believe that they do—they mean you're likely to kick the bucket before long. If you do, I'd like to learn how it's brought about, but if you keep your wits working you may prove me wrong.'

Heaving himself out of the car, Banstead rumbled, 'Many thanks for the tip, but I think you're nutty. You've a score of doctors against you on your own admission.'

'That's just the hell of it. Somebody's invented what looks like the perfect crime, and I want to prove that it isn't.'

'Well,' joked Banstead, 'see you when I'm dying!'

Then his burly figure faded into the darkness of the drive. The screen of trees on either side thickened the gloom about the path, and the blackness swallowed him like a hungry maw.

As his feet crunched steadily nearer and nearer to the house, a tall, lean man waiting in the thick shadow of an outhouse nudged a small, black figure glowering at his side. The black one dragged something white from his pocket, turned his back toward the oncoming walker in the night.

At the wheel of his car the disgruntled Fletcher stared up the silent road and murmured, 'Curse it! If only he'd been the jumpy sort. If only he'd been willing to collaborate, we might have gotten somewhere.' He wondered sullenly for a while, then his foot moved toward the starter.

A voice somewhere up by the house called in loud and angry tones. Then a moment of silence. Slowly, dismally, the crescent moon swam through cloudy seas. Another call, louder, angrier, followed by a shot. Two more shots. Finally a fourth. They were thunderous in the quiet of night.

Dan Fletcher was out of the car and into the dark drive before

the echoes of the last explosion had died away. Ahead of him, somebody, or something, started squealing like a stabbed hog. Lights sprang up all over the distant house as the squeals rose crescendo. It was a long, thin, horrid sound that split the night and wailed up to the wan stars.

A body was crashing through the undergrowth to his left, moving with all the mad abandon of a demented elephant. With lightning speed, his mind decided that flight meant guilt and he plunged that way, his arms pumping at his sides as he hurled his big body along.

He followed entirely by sound, catching first glimpse of his quarry when a lean, lithe figure gracefully vaulted the fence and reached the road. Way back, the eerie screams had changed to a sobbing howl that was slowly dying. The fugitive was a mere ten yards ahead, but going fast, so fast that even the speedy Fletcher could not gain on him by so much as an inch. The fellow seemed completely unaware of one so close upon his heels.

There was a yellow-top waiting around the corner. The fugitive dived into it, bellowing at the dozing driver, saw Fletcher for the first time. Sticking an arm out of the window, he fired at the pounding Fletcher from a range of three yards and missed. His hand was still shaking after the exertion of his wild flight, and his bullet whipped Fletcher's hat from his head.

'Hey!' yelped the taxi driver, suddenly awake.

'You—' growled Fletcher.

He was up to the cab by now and his big hand darted out and seized the wrist behind the menacing gun. Vigorously, Fletcher jerked the wrist upward as the weapon exploded again. The heavy bullet whipped through the treetops and a couple of stricken leaves came floating down.

Still holding the wrist, Fletcher heaved its owner clean out of the cab. At first the other resisted, then suddenly responded to the heave with pantherish agility that almost put Fletcher on the ground.

Caught off balance, Fletcher retained his steely grasp upon the wrist, fastened his other hand upon his snarling opponent's jacket, toppled and went down, dragging the fugitive with him. In grim silence broken only by their panting breaths the two rolled on the sidewalk, fighting furiously.

Desperately, the mystery man clung to his gun. With equal determination, Fletcher struggled to maintain his hold upon the wrist. His free arm moved in pistonlike jabs to the other's midriff. The cold, hard grin remained fixed upon his opponent's leathery

face even as his blows rammed home. Yipping with excitement, the taxi driver danced around their violently writhing forms.

Then, with a ferocious pull, the fugitive ripped his gun hand free, slashed Fletcher across the face with the barrel. The blow was agonizing in the extreme. In Fletcher's brief moment of pain-racked blindness, the other dexterously tossed his weapon into reverse, grasped the barrel, swung the thing like a club.

Down it came, butt first. Fletcher flung up a warding hand, caught the heel plate on the base of his palm. Involuntarily, his shocked fingers curled around the butt and the gun went off. The fugitive slowly arose and emitted an ecstatic gasp like a convert arising from baptism, then flopped sidewise. The hole in his chest was as big as a fist.

'Gawd!' jittered the driver. 'You've killed him!'

His head throbbing as if about to burst, and a line of fire pulsating across his face, Fletcher had a closer look at the victim. A long lanky, hard-bittern specimen, this. Even the ghostly moonlight could not soften these icy features which Fletcher could not remember having seen before.

Then he recalled the strange howls up near the house, snapped to the wide-eyed driver, 'Go fetch the police,' and raced back toward the drive.

Although he was dying, Banstead could talk. Even on his deathbed his old-time roughness remained defiantly in evidence. There was a huge, shapeless, surly woman by his bed, also a white-haired crone with querulous and watery eyes. The old dame's expression was a mixture of curiosity and fright; the big woman's one of callousness, peculiarly undershot with disappointment and alarm.

'Beat it, Ma. Clear out, Josephine,' ordered Banstead. He followed them with a hard stare until they had gone. Then he turned his attention to Fletcher. 'They've phoned for the doctor. He'll be no damned good! I know I'm dying.' He was quite phlegmatic about it. 'Somchow you can tell.'

'We'll see what he has to say before we give you up,' offered Fletcher optimistically.

'I reckon this plays hell with your crack-pot theory, eh?' Banstead grinned lugubriously. 'You didn't say anything about strong-arm stuff. I was supposed to pine away gradually."

'Tell me what happened,' Fletcher suggested. 'But don't talk too much if the effort pulls you down.'

'I'm O.K. I'll see the dawn, anyway.' He licked his lips,

winced. 'I was at the top of the drive, about to take a short cut across the circle of lawn before the door, when I heard a sort of eerie, subdued gabbling to my left. Looking that way, I saw a black dwarf standing on the edge of the moonlight. He had his back turned to me and was jerking something white over his shoulder, pointing it at me and voicing his mumbo jumbo in guttural undertones.'

'And then?'

'I bawled, "What the hell's going on there?" but he took not the slightest notice, went on with his pointing and his gabbling.' Banstead's pupils shrank to pin points as he looked at his listener. 'Mister, I'm no sucker for abracadabra, but what he was doing sent a parade of little frogs hopping up my spine. Every time that white thing flipped over his shoulder I could feel their feet, cold, colder than the grave.'

'So what did you do?'

'I had a gun, a baby automatic. I've carried it for years, ever since—well, never mind. So I took it out and yelled, "Come out of there or I'll shoot!" The dwarf took not a bit of notice. I doubt whether he understood what I was saying. Anyway, I fired without further argument, sending a slug an inch over his pate.' He stopped, bit his bottom lip, shoved his hairy hands down under the covers and nursed his middle.

'There was another guy standing in the deeper shadows. I didn't know that! He drew a bead on me and let me have it right in the guts. He knew where to toss his metal, all right! I went down like a poled steer. The dwarf had now realized that this was no kissing competition, he'd dropped on all fours and was scuttling for the dark parts like a frightened baboon. The moonlight sort of silhouetted his distorted form, and I plonked two pills in his dirty belly before I passed out.'

'He's dead,' informed Fletcher. 'I found his body sprawled at the edge of the lawn. And the guy who plugged you is also cold.' He told Banstead what had happened.

"Good,' exclaimed Banstead, with painful satisfaction. His eyes were being sapped of gloss and hardness, gradually growing bleary. 'Wish Old Man Carver would hurry up.' His pain momentarily faded, and his interest returned. 'Say, what the devil was the thing with which that dwarf was capering?'

'This.' Fletcher held it up. 'It was still in his hand.'

'A bone!'

'Yes, just a polished bone. It looks to me like a human thighbone.'

'Bah!' Banstead was frankly contemptuous. 'Hex stuff! I still think your theory's crazy!'

A violent hammering shook the panels of the front door and Fletcher said, 'Here's the doc at last.'

'No, the police.' Banstead's quiet smile was lopsided. 'They're the only ones who think the whole world is stone deaf.'

Mason leaned right back in his seat, put his feet on his desk, and said, 'Trouble-shooter, eh? There's been more darned trouble since you turned up in this neck of the woods than I've ever known before.'

'Such as what?' Dan Fletcher helped himself to a cigarette from Mason's cut-glass box.

'You come around smelling a murder ring. You get Bodin's gang on the hop at our expense. You scare hell out of two dozen policy-holders and sit by the deathbed of an insured subject. You've some sort of a finger in a couple of killings and bring the police down on me with a lot of nutty questions.'

'Is that all?' asked Fletcher gently.

'No it ain't—isn't. Not by a long shot. You beat it back to head-quarters and stay there three weeks, leaving me hanging in midair.' Mason's face was decidedly sour. 'Meanwhile, half a dozen crazy claimants return their payments in full and four more return them in part, promising the rest later. Three doctors have been around pestering me about hypochondriacs with obsessions concerning this outfit.' His stare was accusing. 'Strange as it may seem—and believe it or not—they say their customers are fading away with a purely imaginary hex stuck on them by the Atlantic & General Assurance Co., and that we've got to make 'em imagine we've taken it off.' His face full of disgust, he spat into the fire.

'You can tell those doctors to inform their patients that their own consciences are killing them.' Fletcher dragged a couple of objects from his pocket, put them on the desk.

'Bones!' The embittered Mason stared glassily, his colour rising. 'Now he makes the place a charnel house!'

'The one on the left,' said Fletcher, carefully, 'is a genuine Australian death-bone.' He stabbed Mason with his glance. 'It works!'

'Huh?'

'Don't ask me how it works because I don't know—and neither does anyone else I've been able to consult in the last three weeks. All I've been able to get is some cabled data on the way it's used.

You hold the knuckle end, turn your back to the victim, point the splintered end over your shoulder at him, exert the right force, spit the proper curses, and he pines away.'

'As if!' said Mason, wiggling his feet.

'A beautiful racket,' Fletcher went on. 'It leaves justice impotent, since the law cannot recognize supernatural ways of killing. Until science can explain the power of the bone, the law's only verdict is death from natural causes.'

'Ugh!' Mason gazed over the tees of his boots at the bone, shifted his feet away from any possible area of potency.

'The brain of this murder ring was one Edward "Digger" Kelly, known to our Central Australia office as a clever and persistent insurance pirate, and badly wanted by the Australian police. The accomplice who performed his devilment was Charlie Murra, a semi-civilized Myall priest.'

'And what,' demanded Mason, eyeing the second bone, 'is that other relic?'

'Oh, that?' Fletcher's grin was wide. 'Just an ordinary harmless bone I got from a butcher. Since the law cannot exercise full retribution, I've been exercising some of my own.' He produced his list, tossed it onto the desk. 'I've made another call on all our esteemed clients and pointed it at them.'

'What?' yelped Mason. He dragged his feet off the desk and sat upright.

'They didn't like it. Five of them fainted, two had hysterics. All I said to them was six sentences of gibberish regardless of whether or not they'd passed out.' His grin spread from ear to ear. 'And now, according to you, they're dragging back their illgotten gains.'

'Yeah,' agreed Mason, popeyed. He thumbed a small notebook. 'Eighty thousand so far.'

'Guess I'd better stick to these sad remains.' Nonchalantly, he put the bones in his pocket. He studied Mason, found him speculative and unwary. In a loud voice, he said, 'And don't say peaks can't be shot off graphs!' His big fist came down on the desk with a hearty thump that shook the room, and the spurt from both inkpots was eminently satisfactory.

'No, Dan.' Gloomily, Mason heaved himself from his seat, wandered off in search of two large sheets of blotting paper.

A Matter of Instinct

IT was his receptionist's evening off, and Dr. Blain had to answer the waiting-room buzzer himself. Mentally cursing the prolonged absence of Tod Mercer, his general factotum, he closed the tap of the burette, took the beaker of neutralized liquid from beneath, and set it on a shelf.

He thrust a folding spatula into his waistcoat pocket, rubbed his hands together, gave a brief glance around the small laboratory. Then he carried his tall, spare form to the waiting-room.

The visitor was sprawled in an easy chair. Dr. Blain looked him over and saw a cadaverous individual with mackerel eyes, mottled skin and pale, bloated hands. The fellow's clothes didn't fit him much better than a sack.

Blain weighed him up as a case of pernicious ulcers, or else a hopeful seller of insurance that he had no intention of buying. In any event, he decided, the man's expression had a weird twist. It gave him the willies.

'Dr. Blain, I believe?' said the man in the chair. His voice gargled slowly, uncannily, and the sound of it grew pimples down Blain's spine.

Without waiting for a reply, and with his dead optics fixed on the standing Blain, the visitor continued, 'We are a cadaverous individual with mackerel eyes, mottled skin, and pale, bloated hands.' Sitting down abruptly, Dr. Blain grasped the arms of his chair until his knuckles stood out like blisters.

His visitor gargled on slowly and imperturbably. 'Our clothes don't fit us much better than a sack. We are a case of pernicious ulcers, or else a seller of insurance that you have no intention of buying. Our expression has a strange twist, and it gives you the willies.'

The speaker rolled an eye that leered, with horrible lack of lustre, at the thunderstruck Blain. He added, 'Our voice gargles, and the sound of it raises pimples on your spine. We have eyes that leer at you with lack of lustre that you consider horrible.'

With a mighty effort, Blain leaned forward, red-faced, trembling. His iron-grey hairs were erect on the back of his neck. Before he could open his mouth, his visitor spoke his unuttered

words for him: 'Good heavens! You've been reading my very thoughts!'

The fellow's cold optics remained riveted to Blain's astounded face while the latter shot to his feet. Then he said briefly, simply, 'Sit down.'

Blain remained standing. Small globules of perspiration crept through the skin of his brow, trickled down his tired, lined face.

More urgently, warningly, the other gulped, 'Sit down!'

His legs strangely weak at the knees, Blain sat. He stared at the ghastly pallor of his visitor's features and stammered, 'W-who the devil are you?'

'That!' He tossed Blain a clipping.

A casual look, followed by one far more intent, then Blain protested, 'But this is a newspaper report about a corpse being stolen from a morgue.'

'Correct,' agreed the being opposite.

'But I don't understand.' Blain's strained features showed his puzzlement.

'This,' said the other, pointing a colourless finger at his sagging waistcoat, 'is the corpse.'

'*What*?' For the second time, Blain came to his feet. The clipping dropped from his nerveless fingers, fluttered to the carpet. He towered over the thing in the chair, expelled his breath in a loud hiss, and sought vainly for words.

'This is the body,' repeated the claimant. His voice sounded as if it were being bubbled through thick oil. He pointed to the clipping. 'You failed to notice the picture. Look at it. Compare the face with the one that we have.'

'We?' Blain queried, his mind in a whirl.

'We! There are many of us. We commandeered this body. Sit down.'

'But—'

'*Sit down*!' The creature in the chair slid a cold, limp hand inside his sloppy jacket, lugged out a big automatic, and pointed it awkwardly. To Blain's view, the weapon's muzzle gaped hugely. He sat down, recovered the clipping, and stared at the picture.

It read, 'The late James Winstanley Clegg, whose body mysteriously vanished last night from Simmstown Morgue.'

Blain looked at his visitor, then at the picture, then at his visitor again. The two were the same; undoubtedly the same. Blood began to pound in his arteries.

The automatic drooped, wavered, and lifted up once more. 'Your questions are anticipated,' slobbered the late James Win-

stanley Clegg. 'No, this is not a case of spontaneous revival of a cataleptic. Your idea is ingenious, but it does not explain the thought-reading.'

'Then what is this a case of?' demanded Blain with sudden courage.

'Confiscation.' His eyes jerked unnaturally. 'We have entered into possession. Before you is a man possessed.' He permitted himself a ghoulish chuckle. 'It seems that in life this brain was endowed with a sense of humour.'

'Nevertheless, I can't—'

'Silence!' The gun wagged to emphasize the command. 'We shall talk; you will listen. We shall comprehend your thoughts.'

'All right.' Dr. Blain lay back in his chair, kept a wary eye on the door. He felt convinced that he had to deal with a madman. Yes, a maniac—despite the thought-reading, despite that picture on the cutting.

'Two days ago,' gargled Clegg, or what once had been Clegg, 'a so-called meteor landed outside this town.'

'I read about it,' Blain admitted. 'They looked for it, but failed to find it.'

'That phenomenon was actually a space vessel.' The automatic sagged in the flabby hand; its holder rested the weapon on his lap. 'It was a space vessel that had carred us from our home world of Glantok. The vessel was exceedingly small by your standards —but we, too, are small. Very small. We are sub-microscopic, and our number is myriad.

'No, not intelligent germs.' The ghastly speaker stole the thought from his listener's mind. 'We are less even than those.' He paused while he search around for words more explicit. 'In the mass, we resemble a liquid. You might regard us as an intelligent virus.'

'Oh!' Blain struggled to calculate the number of jumps necessary to reach the door, and do it without revealing his thoughts.

'We Glantokians are parasitical in the sense that we inhabit and control the bodies of lesser creatures. We came here, to your world, while occupying the body of a small Glantokian mammal.' He coughed with a viscous rumble deep down in his gullet, then continued.

'When we landed and emerged, an excited dog chased our creature and caught it. We caught the dog. Our creature died when we deserted it. The dog was useless for our purpose, but it served to transport us into your town and find us this body. We

acquired the body. When we left the dog, it lay on its back and died.'

The gate creaked with a sudden rasping sound that brought Blain's taut nerves to the snapping point. Light footsteps pit-patted up the asphalt path toward the front door. He waited with bated breath, ears alert, eyes wide with apprehension.

'We took this body, loosened the rigid joints, softened the dead muscles, and made it walk. It seems that its brain was fairly intelligent in life, and even in death its memories remain recorded. We utilize this dead brain's knowledge to think in human terms and to converse with you after your own fashion.'

The approaching footsteps were very, very near. Blain shifted his feet to a solid position on the rug, tightened his grip on the arms of his chair, and fought to keep his thoughts under control. The other took not the slightest notice, but kept his haggard face turned to Blain and continued to speak.

'Under our control, the body stole these clothes and this weapon. Its own defunct mind recorded the weapon's purpose and told us how it is used. It also told us about you.'

'Me?' Startled, Dr. Blain leaned forward, braced his arms, and calculated that his intended spring would barely beat the lift of the opposing automatic.

The feet outside had reached the steps.

'It is not wise,' warned the creature who claimed to be a corpse. He raised his gun with lethargic hand. 'Your thoughts are not only observed but their conclusions anticipated.'

Blain relaxed. The feet were tripping up the steps to the front door.

'A dead body is a mere makeshift,' the other mouthed. 'We must have a live one, with little or no organic disabilty. As we increase, we must have more bodies. Unfortunately, the susceptibility of nervous systems is in direct proportion to the intelligence of their owners.' He gasped, then choked with the same liquid rattle as before.

'We cannot guarantee to occupy the bodies of the intelligently conscious without sending them insane in the process. A disordered brain is less use to us than a recently dead one, and no more than a wrecked machine would be to you.'

The patter of footsteps ceased; the front door opened, and somebody entered the passage. The door clicked shut. Feet moved along the carpet towards the waiting-room.

'Therefore,' continued the human who was not human, 'We must occupy the intelligent while they are too deeply unconscious

to be affected by our permeation, and we must be in complete possession when they awake. We must have the assistance of someone able to treat the intelligent in the manner we desire, and do it without arousing general suspicion. In other words, we require the co-operation of a doctor.'

The awful eyes bulged slightly. Their owner added, 'Since this inefficient body is beyond even our power to animate much longer, we must have a fresh, live, healthy one as soon as it can be obtained.'

The feet in the passage hesitated, stopped. The door opened. At that instant, the dead Clegg stabbed a pallid finger at Blain and burbled, 'You will assist us'—the finger swerved towards the door—'and that body will do for the first.'

The girl in the doorway was young, fair-haired, pleasingly plump. She paused there, one hand concealing the crimson of her small, half-opened mouth. Her blue eyes were wide with fearful fascination as they gazed at the blanched mask behind the pointing finger.

There was a moment's deep silence, while the digit maintained its fateful gesture. Its owner's features became subject to progressive achromatism, grew more hueless, more ashy. His eyes—dead balls in frigid sockets—suddenly glittered with minute specks of light, green light, hellish. He struggled clumsily to his feet, teetered backwards and forwards on his heels.

The girl gasped. Her eyes lowered, saw the automatic in a hand escaped from the grave. She screamed on a note weak because of its height She screamed as if she were surrendering her soul to the unknown. Then, as the living dead tottered towards her, she closed her eyes and slumped.

Blain got her just before she hit the floor. He covered the distance in three frantic leaps, caught her smoothly moulded body, saved it from bruising contact. He rested her head upon the carpet, patted her cheeks vigorously.

'She's fainted,' he growled, in open anger. 'She may be a patient or may have come to summon me to a patient. An urgent case, perhaps.'

'Enough!' The voice was curt, despite its eerie bubbling. The gun pointed directly at Blain's brow. 'We see, from your thoughts, that this fainting condition is a temporary one. Nevertheless, it is opportune. You will take advantage of the situation, place the body under an anaesthetic, and we shall claim it for our own.'

From his kneeling position beside the girl, Blain looked up and said slowly and deliberately, 'I shall see you in hell!'

'No need to have spoken the thought,' remarked the creature. He grimaced horribly, took two jerky steps forward. 'You may do it yourself, or else we shall do it with the aid of your own knowledge and your own flesh. A bullet through your heart, we take possession of you, repair the wound, and you are ours.

'Damn you!' he cursed, stealing the words from Blain's own lips. 'We could use you in any case, but we prefer a live body to a dead one.'

Throwing a hopeless glance around the room, Dr. Blain uttered a mental prayer for help—a prayer cut short by the grin of understanding on his opponent's face.

Getting up from his knees, he lifted the girl's limp form, carried her through the door, along the passage, and into his surgery. The thing that was the body of Clegg stumbled grotesquely behind him.

Gently lowering the girl to a chair, Blain rubbed her hands and wrists, patted her cheeks again. Faint colour crept back to her skin; her eyes fluttered. Blain stepped to a cupboard, slid aside its glass doors, grasped a bottle of sal volatile. The automatic prodded him between his shoulder-blades.

'You forget that your mind processes are like an open book. You are trying to revive the body and are playing for time.' The sickly countenance behind the weapon forced its facial muscles into a lop-sided scowl. 'Place the body on that table and anaesthetize it.'

Unwillingly, Dr. Blain withdrew his hand from the cupboard. He picked up the girl, laid her on the examination table, switched on the powerful lamp that hung directly overhead.

'More meddling!' commented the other. 'Turn off that lamp—the one already burning is quite sufficient.'

Blain turned off the lamp. His face drawn with agitation, but head erect, his fists bunched, he faced the menacing weapon, and said, 'Listen to me. I'll make you a proposition.'

'Nonsense!' The former Clegg wandered around the table with slow, dragging steps. 'As we remarked before, you are playing for time. Your own brain advertises the fact.' He stopped abruptly as the recumbent girl murmured vague words and tried to sit up. 'Quick! The anaesthetic!'

Before either could move, the girl sat up. She came upright and looked straight into a ghastly face that mopped and mowed a

foot from her own features. She shuddered and said pitifully, 'Let me out of here. Let me out. Please!'

A bloated hand reached out to push her. She lay down to avoid contact with it.

Taking advantage of the slight diversion, Blain slid a hand behind his back, felt for an ornamental poker hanging on the wall. The gun swung up even as his fingers found the impromptu weapon and curled round its cool metal.

'You forget yourself.' Pin-point fires sparkled in the other's blotchy eyes. 'Mental understanding is not limited in direction. We see you even when we are looking elsewhere.' The gun moved to indicate the girl. 'Tie that body down.'

Obediently, Dr. Blain found straps, fastened the girl securely to the table. His grey hair was limp, his face moist, as he bent over her and threaded the buckles. He looked at her with courage hardly justified and whispered, 'Patience—do not fear.'

He threw a significant glance at the clock ticking upon the wall. The instrument's hands indicated two minutes before eight.

'So you expect aid,' effervesced the tones of a corporate myriad. 'Tod Mercer, your handy-man, who ought to have been here before now. You think he might be of help, though you have little faith in what few wits he has. In your opinion, he is a dumb ox—too stupid to know his feet from his hands.'

'You devil!' swore Dr. Blain at this recital of his thoughts.

'Let this Mercer come. He will be of use—to us! There are enough of us for two bodies—and even a live fool is better than an educated corpse.' Anaemic lips twisted in a snarl. 'Meanwhile, get busy with that body.'

'I don't think I have any ether,' Blain protested.

'You have something that will do. Your cortex shouts it! Be speedy, lest we lose patience and take you at the cost of your sanity.'

Swallowing hard, Blain opened a drawer and extracted a nasal frame. He clipped on its cotton gauze-pad, placed the frame over the frightened girl's nose. He felt safe in giving her a reassuring wink. A wink is not a thought.

Opening the cupboard once more, Blain stood in front of it, summoned all his faculties, and compelled his mind to recite, 'Ether, ether, ether.' At the same time, he forced his hand toward a bottle of concentrated sulphuric acid. He made a mighty effort to achieve his dual purpose, urged his fingers nearer to the bottle. He got it.

Straining every fibre of his being to do one thing while his mind

was fixed upon another, he turned round, withdrawing the glass stopper as he turned. Then he stood still, the open bottle in his right hand. The figure of death was immediately in front of him, gun raised.

'Ether,' sneered the vocal cords of Clegg. 'Your conscious mind yelled "Ether!" while your subconscious mind whispered "Acid!" Do you think your inferior intelligence can cope with ours? Do you think you can destroy that which is already dead? You fool!' The gun inched forward. 'The anaesthetic—without further delay.'

Offering no reply, Dr. Blain rammed the stopper into its neck, replaced the bottle whence he had taken it. More deliberately, moving with utmost slowness, he crossed the floor to a smaller cupboard, opened it, took out a small bottle of ether. He placed the bottle on the radiator and started to close the cupboard.

'Take it off!' croaked the uncanny voice with high-pitched urgency. The gun emitted a warning click as Blain snatched the bottle. 'So you hoped the radiator would make the stuff vaporize rapidly enough to burst the bottle, eh?'

Dr. Blain said nothing. Taking as much time as possible, he conveyed the volatile liquid to the table. The girl watched his approach, her eyes wide with apprehension. She gave a low sob.

Blain flung a glance at the clock, but, quick as the glance was, his tormentor caught the thought behind it and grinned. 'He is here now.'

'Who is here?' demanded Blain.

'Your man, Mercer. He is outside, just about to enter the front door. We perceive the futile wanderings of his sluggish mind. You have not underestimated what little intelligence he does possess.'

The front door opened in confirmation of the speaker's prophecy. The girl struggled to raise her head, hope in her eyes.

'Prop her mouth open with something,' articulated the voice under alien control. 'We shall enter through the mouth.' He paused, as heavy feet scuffled on the front-door mat. 'And call that fool in here. We shall use him also.'

His veins bulging on his forehead, Dr. Blain called, 'Tod! Come here!' He found a dental gag, toyed with its ratchet.

Excitement thrilled his nerves from head to feet. No gun could shoot two ways at once. If he could wangle the idiotic Mercer into the right position, and put him wise—If he could be on one side and Tod on the other—

'Don't try it,' advised the animated Clegg. 'Don't even think it. If you do, we shall end up by having you both.'

Tod Mercer lumbered into the room, his heavy soles thumping the rug. He was a big man, with thick shoulders jutting below a plump, moon-like face that sprouted two days' growth. He stopped short when he saw the table and the girl. His great, wide, stupid eyes roamed from the girl to the doctor.

'Heck, Doc,' he said, with an uneasy fidget, 'I got me a puncture and had to change tyres on the road.'

'Never mind about that,' came a sardonic rumble right behind him. 'You're in plenty of time.'

Tod turned around sluggishly, twisting his boots as if each weighed a ton. He stared at the thing that had been Clegg and said, 'Beg pardon, Mister. I didn't know you was there.'

His cow-like eyes wandered disinterestedly over the living corpse, over the pointing automatic, then slewed towards the anxious Blain. Tod opened his mouth to say something. He closed his mouth; a look of faint surprise came into his fat features; his eyes swivelled back and found the automatic again.

This time, the look didn't last one-tenth of a second. His eyes realized what they saw. He swung a ham-like fist with astounding swiftness, slammed it into the erstwhile Clegg's awful features. The blow was dynamite, sheer dynamite. The cadaver went down with a crash that shook the room.

'Quick!' screamed Dr. Blain. 'Get the gun.' He vaulted the intervening table—girl and all—landed heavily, made a wild kick at the weapon still gripped in a flabby hand.

Tod Mercer stood abashed, his eyes turning this way and that. The automatic exploded thunderously; its slug nicked the tubular metal edge of the table, ricocheted with a noise like that of a buzz saw, and ripped a foot of plaster from the opposite wall.

Blain kicked frantically. The gun boomed again. Glass tinkled in the farther cupboard. The girl on the table screamed shrilly.

The scream penetrated Mercer's thick skull and brought action. Slamming down a great boot on the rubbery wrist, he plucked the automatic from cold fingers. He hefted the weapon, pointed it.

'You can't kill it like that,' shouted Blain. He jabbed Tod Mercer to emphasize his words. 'Get the girl out of here. Jump to it, man, for heaven's sake!'

Blain's urgency brooked no argument. Mercer handed over the automatic, moved to the table, ripped the straps from the weeping girl. His huge arms plucked her up, bore her from the room.

Down on the floor, the pilfered body writhed and struggled to get up. Its eyes had disappeared. Their sockets were now filled with swirling pools of emerald luminosity. Its mouth gaped as

it slowly regurgitated a bright green phosphorescence. The spawn of Glantok was leaving its host!

The body sat up with its back to the wall. Its limbs jerked and twitched in nightmarish postures. It was a fearful travesty of a human being. Green—bright and living green—crept sinuously from its eyes and mouth, formed twisting, swirling snakes and pools upon the floor.

Blain gained the door in one gigantic leap, snatching the ether bottle from the table as he passed. He stood in the doorway, trembling. Then he flung the bottle in the centre of the seething green. He flicked his automatic lighter, tossed it after the bottle. The entire room boomed into a mighty blast of flame that immediately became a fiery hell.

The girl clung tightly to Dr. Blain's arm while they stood by the roadside and watched the house burn. She said, 'I came to ask you to see my young brother. We think he's got measles.'

'I'll come soon,' Blain promised.

A van roared up the road, stopped near them with engine still racing. A policeman put his head out and shouted, 'What a blaze! We saw the glare a mile back along the road. We've called the fire brigade.'

'They'll be too late, I'm afraid,' said Blain.

'Insured?' asked the policeman sympathetically.

'Yes.'

'Everybody out of the house?'

Blain nodded an affirmative, and the policeman said, 'We happened to be out this way looking for an escaped lunatic.' The van rolled forward.

'Hey!' Blain shouted. The van stopped again. 'Was this madman's name James Winstanley Clegg?'

'Clegg?' came the driver's voice from the other side of the van. 'Why, that's the fellow whose body walked out of the Morgue when the attendant had his back turned for a minute. Funny thing, they found a dead mongrel right by where the missing body ought to have been. The reporters are starting to call it a werewolf, but it's still a dog to me.'

'Anyway, this fellow isn't Clegg,' chimed in the first policeman. 'He's Wilson. He's small, but nasty. This is what he looks like.' He stretched an arm from the car, handed Blain a photograph.

Blain studied the picture in the light of rising flames. It bore not the slightest resemblance to his visitor of that evening. 'I'll

remember that faee,' Dr. Blain commented, handing the photograph back.

'Know anything about this Clegg mystery?' inquired the driver.

'I know that he's dead,' Blain answered truthfully.

Pensively, Dr. Blain watched flames leap skyward from his home. He turned to the gaping Mercer and said, 'What beats me is how you managed to turn and hit that fellow without his anticipating your intention and plugging you where you stood.'

'I saw the gun, and I 'it 'im.' Mercer spread apologetic hands. 'I saw 'e'd got a gun, and I 'it 'im without thinking.'

'*Without thinking*!' murmured Blain.

Dr. Blain chewed his bottom lip, stared at the mounting fire. Roof timbers caved in with a violent crash; a flood of sparks poured upwards.

With his mind, but not his ears, he heard faint threnodies of an alien wail that became weaker and weaker, and presently died away.

I'm a Stranger Here Myself

A NEAT matron in her early forties, she was slightly flustered as she came into the room.

'Please be seated, Mrs. Enderby,' invited Wilson. His sharp eyes watched her lower into a chair. He gave her a few moments to get settled. 'In what way can I help you?'

'It isn't me, Mr. Wilson. It's my boy John.'

'Indeed? Is he giving you trouble?'

'Not exactly.' She pulled off her gloves, toyed with them nervously. Her left hand bore a ring with sapphires that matched her eyes. 'It's just that his personality seems to be changing.'

'All children change.'

'Not the way John's doing.'

Smiling tolerantly, Wilson said, 'Few mothers understand sons, especially as they grow older. It takes a father to do that. Mothers have more in common with daughters.'

'John upsets his father,' she informed.

'In what manner?'

'Well . . . well . . .' She sought around for words to explain it. 'He used to trust us implicitly. But now he doesn't. I feel that he views us as amiable liars, though we have done nothing to lose his confidence. He makes enigmatic remarks.' She leaned forward. 'He isn't *normal*.'

'Is that all?' asked Wilson.

'No. He has a most unpleasant habit of putting pertinent questions at unexpected moments. The same ones over and over again. There is nothing wrong with his memory, so why should he keep asking?' Mrs. Enderby stopped fiddling with her gloves, put them in her handbag, closed it with a loud snap. 'He's checking up to see whether my answers are always the same. He's testing my veracity. Sometimes he questions his father by way of additional check. I don't like it.'

Wilson said, soothingly, 'A healthy child has an active mind and is intensely curious. Its favourite words are why, who, where and how. That is perfectly natural though it can be awkward at times. You mustn't let it worry you.'

'Mustn't I?' She surveyed him a while, estimating him, sum-

ming him up, then went on, 'Did you ever say to your father, "How do *I* know that you're my father?" '

'By golly, I'd have lost some basic epidermis if I had!' he assured. Leaning back in his chair, he rubbed his chin. 'Did he actually say *that*?'

'Yes.'

'And what was your husband's reply?'

'Irrational and emotional, I'm afraid. He flew into an awful rage. I don't blame him a bit. I felt most annoyed too.'

'Of course.' Wilson brooded a bit. 'How old is John?'

'Fifteen.'

He sat up, alert. 'My goodness, I thought you were talking about a mere child. Why, he's practically a young man.'

'That is why I have come here,' said Mrs. Enderby. 'He is much too old for such childish questionings and imaginings. Doctor Swain suggested I take him to a specialist and recommended you. He said you would find John an interesting case.'

'H'm! Well, I am willing to do what I can. How is your boy making out at school?'

Mrs. Enderby's face cleared, took on a touch of pride. 'He is top of his class.'

'I half expected that. Problem children usually run to one extreme or the other, sharp-witted or witless. Have you brought him with you?'

'He is waiting in the reception room.'

Wilson stood up. 'I'll see him right away.' He patted her shoulder as he conducted her to the door. 'Don't bother yourself over this, Mrs. Enderby. Youth has mental problems peculiarly its own. They are easy to clear up once we get down to the root-cause of them.'

'Shall I wait until you've finished with him?'

'No, no.' He opened the door, gave her a reassuring smile. 'We might be an hour or so and I guess he's plenty big enough to find his own way home.' Then he called, 'Come in, John, please.'

Passing his mother with a rueful grin, John Enderby entered the room and took on the bored expression of one compelled to assist the foolish in their folly.

Closing the door, Wilson gave him the once-over, finding him a little above medium height, fair haired, with sensitive, intelligent features.

'Lie down there, John.' He pointed to an overstuffed couch. 'Take it easy. Relax as much as you can.'

When the other had obeyed he resumed his seat behind the

desk, took a silver pencil from a drawer, prepared to make notes.

'Now, John, let's get something clear at the start. I'm a specialist in mental therapy. Maybe a good one, maybe a bad one. That's for you to judge—and I won't mind if you think me a stinker.' He gave a friendly laugh, went on, 'But I am not a quack. Neither am I a nosey-poke trying to pry into other people's personal affairs. I'm merely an ordinary individual who likes his fellows, thinks them immensely interesting and earns a living by helping them to get along.'

'The approach jovial,' remarked John. 'Gain the patient's confidence before you tear out his soul.'

Wilson blinked, frowned, made a brief note on his scratch-pad. 'People must have some confidence in one another or they would never get anywhere.'

'Are they getting anywhere?'

'Let's keep to the task in hand, shall we? I'm only trying to help you. And your mother. She's bothered about you. Mothers are over-sensitive sometimes. She feels hurt.'

'Why?'

'Oh, she has plenty of reasons. Probably most of them are imaginary—but not all. For instance, at your age you know quite well that the worst insult you can offer anyone is implication of bastardy. So when a boy sees fit to question his own parentage—'

'Have you ever questioned yours?' asked John, turning his head and looking at him. His eyes were large, luminous and too genuinely curious to arouse resentment.

'No,' said Wilson, shortly. 'I know my origin.'

'You don't,' John denied. 'You have only your mother's word that she is your mother; your father's that he is your father. And a piece of paper to prove it which is no proof at all.'

Slightly irritated, Wilson gave back, 'You might as well suggest that I don't know I'm born.'

'You don't know that either,' asserted John, with devastating confidence. 'You've only got other folk's word for it. Secondhand evidence.'

'If I had never been born I couldn't be here.'

'You could—like me.'

'How?'

'Never mind,' said John, very politely. He eyed the ceiling and suppressed a yawn.

Two minutes dragged past while Wilson silently stewed it over. He had come across some queer delusions in his time but never anything quite like this.

It is normal and healthy for a boy of seven or eight to think himself Hopalong Cassidy. It is far from normal for a youth of fifteen to doubt his own birth. If one could question that, one could question anything. The eternal verities could be shot to blazes. Crime does not pay. God is love. Matter exists. I am *Me.*

His mind swirled around.

After a time, he resumed in persuasive tones. 'See here, John, if you'll co-operate and let me take you back along your own memory-tracks, I think I can prove to your own satisfaction that—'

'You won't get very far, Mr. Wilson,' he chipped in.

'Why not?'

'I had a dose of that memory-stuff six months ago. Tried it to check on my own notions. Didn't tell mother, of course.' John Enderby shifted around on the couch, grinned to himself. 'The auditor got stalled and gave me up.'

'Did he say why?'

'Yes. He said I'd got an irremovable block at age four. Somebody had swiped part of my engram-bank.'

Wilson dropped his pencil, felt around for it in fumbling manner, picked it up.

'John as I get it, you've developed firm and serious doubts about your origin.' He was playing for time, feeling strangely uneasy. 'Mind telling me how you got that way?'

'Bits fell into place. Sometimes they do, by sheer accident, and then you suddenly see something you'd never thought of before.'

'I concede that,' gave Wilson. 'Quite a few worthwhile inventions have come from haphazard circumstances that lined themselves up and made a new idea. What were your bits?'

'A book and a pig and a bunch of friends.'

'Huh?'

'They added up—and the memory-block underlined the result.'

'Going to tell me how?' Wilson prodded.

'What's the use? You don't confess to a prison warder how you committed the crime. There's just no point in it.' Getting off the couch, he walked to the door. 'Sorry, Mr. Wilson, but I think I'm wasting your time and maybe someone else needs it more than me. Mind if I go home?'

Staring at him, Wilson noted the large eyes, the intense light burning within them. Their steady, unblinking gaze gave him the fidgets. He hitched his shoulders to shake off the sensation. No

wonder Mrs. Enderby showed a mild touch of the heebies. The boy was peculiar, to say the least.

'I would much rather you remained, John. You haven't helped me anything like enough.'

'I have not helped you?' He stood with one hand on the door-handle, youthfully impatient, giving Wilson the impression that at any moment he would take it on the run.

'You've not helped me sufficiently,' Wilson said. 'We all need help some time or other and I'm no exception. I've got to live—and in some way I live on other people's ideas.'

That ought to do it. Throw himself on the boy's mercy. Flatter his ego.

John hesitated. His hand moved the door a little, opening it gently, closing it again. 'Oh, well, I reckon I can stay until three o'clock.' Having made up his mind he walked back to the couch, his steps soft and completely silent. He lay down again, repeated with emphasis, 'Until three o'clock.'

'We'll get a move on, then.' Wilson found a handkerchief, wiped eyes that had gone momentarily out of focus. Someday soon, he decided, he'd have another check-over for glasses. 'Be candid with me, John. You've nothing to lose and might have much to gain. Besides, I'm really interested. Tell me about these bits of yours, the book, the pig and the friends.'

John said, 'I'm fond of fantasy fiction. Through it I made contact with a small bunch of people with similar tastes. We got along fine. Birds of a feather.'

'Naturally.'

'We had something in common. Lots of folk haven't got it, but we had! I spent a long, long time trying to discover precisely what it was we had got, why we were like we were, and in what manner we differed from the broad mass of humanity.'

'And then?'

'One day I found it. Maybe it was inevitable that I should find it because all of them were outsiders—and I'm a stranger here myself!' The eyes settled on his listener. 'We were cosmos-conscious.'

'Is that all?' asked Wilson, disappointed.

'No. I thought no more of it until one day I read a book about the operation of the mind. It said that the memory stores data all through life, some true, some false, going back almost to time of conception. Visual data, tactile data, aural data, all sorts. Or

nearly all. It had little to say about one kind of data which maybe is the most important of all.'

'What kind?'

'Intuitive data. The stuff even baby animals use when they are said to obey their instincts.' He paused, suddenly shot a question. 'Do you believe in God?'

'Yes,' said Wilson, taken abaek.

'Why?'

'Well—'

'Your faith is based on intuitive data,' declared John, an appallingly old head on young shoulders. 'It may be true. It may be false in that it is misconstrued for lack of suitable reference. But it's still intuitive.'

'I'll give you that,' agreed Wilson, registering no progress but anxious to keep the other going while in a talkative mood. He glanced at the clock. A quarter to three.

'I think certain people are cosmos-conscious because they possess intuitive data denied to others. They *know* the cosmos is inhabited, that there *is* a multitude of sentient worlds. It is in their minds, deep in their memories. That makes them what they are even though they might not realize it.'

'Where does the pig come in?' inquired Wilson.

'I read about the pig one day. The story was a true one, in several magazines. It sort of linked up my data and made a picture.'

'Tell me of it.'

Throwing him an amused glance, John said, 'A family adopted a newly-born piglet as a pet. They also had two pups. The pig grew up with the pups, saw them become dogs, never met another pig. Now, psychologists are visiting the family to inspect the pig.'

'Why?'

'It makes noises halfway between a grunt and a bark and obviously is trying to bark like the dogs. It chases cats. It eats dog-food. It stops by trees and fire-plugs.' He sat up slowly, eyes glowing. 'It thinks it is a dog. It has never stumbled over any reasons to think differently.'

'A logical consequence, I suppose,' Wilson allowed. 'But where's the significance, if any?'

'Once I thought I was a human being. I'd never found any reason to think differently.'

Wilson came erect, icy coldness on the back of his neck. 'Of course you're a human being, you nit-wit. And so are all your cosmos-conscious friends.'

'Would you dare say anything else?'

'As I understand it,' Wilson said, still standing and carefully avoiding the eyes, 'you have somehow conceived and nourished a delusion that this world is in a dark conspiracy to fool you and a little flock of non-human friends into thinking you are human beings. How silly! Why should anyone bother? What have they to gain by it?'

'It's their job, or part of their job. Like it's my mother's appointed task to pose as my mother. Someone has to nurse—and watch—the malcontents brought in from outside.'

'Jumping Japhet!' Wilson made a derisive gesture. 'Do you really believe that you're some other world's sinner who has been punished by being shrunk down to baby-size, dumped on this planet and kidded along until you've served your sentence?'

'Certainly not.' John studied the ceiling speculatively. 'That is merely one theory out of about forty I've thought up—some more plausible than others. There's *got* to be an explanation of how some have intuitive data withheld from others.'

Sitting down, Wilson breathed heavily and gave forth. 'Most people are too busy earning a living to waste time pondering the possibility about life in the universe. It's as simple as that!'

'Some of my cosmos-conscious friends are the busiest people I know,' John retorted. 'They earn livings, and good ones.'

'Look, that pig never got hold of a mirror. Surely you can *see* that you are a human being?'

'The resemblance is excellent—as was intended.' Then he added, 'Outwardly.'

Wilson tried another tack. 'Let's look at this sensibly. Which do you think is the more logical: to believe a thing because it can be proved, or because it cannot be disproved?'

'Apply that to your own beliefs,' suggested John, pointedly.

'Never mind mine. We're dealing with yours. What proof have you?'

'One, there's this question of intuitive data. Two, factual data stolen from my engram-bank. Three, lack of consistency in my guardians. Four—'

'What was that last one?'

'Lack of consistency. For example, once mother told me I was born at six in the morning. Another time it was four. Father said five. I weighed eight pounds. Then six and three-quarters. A self-appointed aunt attended my birth. Or maybe two aunts and a cousin.'

'That proves nothing but parental muddle-mindedness,' Wilson

pointed out. 'What we need is definite, concrete, self-evident, undeniable proof that you are non-human.'

'Not so easy,' John admitted with great reluctance. 'I am handicapped by human conventions.'

'How in heaven's name can that be? Either there is evidence or there is not!'

One can detect and identify differences from the human norm only by measuring oneself against average humans,' John pointed out. 'But there are human functions and powers never exercised publicly. Convention demands that they be kept private. There's just no way of telling what an ordinary man is able to do and does do when he is entirely alone. Result is that I don't fully know what powers humans possess and therefore have no means of making accurate comparison with myself.'

'I don't quite understand,' said Wilson, watching him.

'Well, let us suppose for the sake of argument that all humans have pyrotic powers but for some silly reason it is considered indecent to employ them in public, how would I ever get to know they are pyrotics?'

'Are *you* a pyrotic?'

'No, of course not.'

'There you are then.' Wilson was vaguely peeved. He felt let down. For a moment he had nursed the wild hope that he was about to trap a genuine paranormal, but the hope had been dashed. 'Don't you see how utterly absurd all this is? You have a high I.Q. and a first-class imagination which you have permitted to master you under the glib but not-so-plausible stimulus of fantastic literature. I think that—'

'If I am right,' interrupted John, 'you would take good care to conceal your real thoughts. You would voice false ones calculated to shove me the way you want me to go.'

'If you are right, I'd know it, being one of your imaginary multitude of deceivers. I don't know it.'

'I can cover that two ways. Your assurance may be false or true. If false, it is worthless. If true, it is also worthless—because the dogs did nothing to disillusion the pig!'

"That's irrelevant.' Frowning to himself, Wilson had an annoyed chew at his bottom lip. 'You're not right and you can't prove you are right.' He paused, added, 'But I can prove you wrong.'

'How?'

By plain commonsense logic. Look at it this way: a world

comprised mostly of human beings would not go to all the tedious trouble of fooling a small quota of non-humans without an excellent motive. Am I right?'

'Yes,' admitted John.

'This same motive would impel us to take any measures, no matter how drastic, to prevent the deception from being discovered and exposed.'

'Correct.'

'Therefore it should be my grim duty to kill you here and now, and thus close your trap for keeps.' He emitted a harsh chuckle. 'Right?'

'Wrong,' said John, cool and self-assured.

'So I'm wrong.' Wilson could not conceal his sarcasm. 'Would you care to explain how I'm wrong?'

'Certainly. My death would affect the future but not the past. It would not rid this world of any to whom I may already have talked—and also know too much.'

'Go on.'

'Furthermore, whether human or non-human, I am not unique. If I can think things out all by myself, so can others. My ending would not rid you of the obligation to hunt for others who see what I see.'

'Is that all?' Wilson's hand slid into a drawer, felt around until it sensed the cold of a loaded automatic. Somebody was going to take a very poor view of this. The correct technique was to report the matter in complete detail, let others sit in judgment and—if deemed desirable—an unfortunate accident would be arranged. But on a plea of dire necessity he might get away with it. 'Is that all?'

'No, Mr. Wilson.' The other stirred, sat up, placed hands on knees. 'Killing is more easily talked about than done.'

'Is it?' He edged the coldness out of the drawer, levelled the automatic at the boy. 'Of course you are wrong, as you can see. I not only find it easy to kill you, but find it absolutely necessary.'

The boy remained strangely unperturbed. 'Then you admit I am right?'

'Of course.'

'You would not say that if you thought I'd leave here alive.'

'Quite true. So you realize how easy it actually is to kill you?'

'Naturally. If I escaped, the truth would be out, and we "strangers" would know what to do. Also you must know that we *can* do something, or it would not be absolutely necessary to kill

me now, when, to maintain the illusion, you'd have to be apprehended and punished—which in this state is the electric chair.'

'True.'

The boy rose to his feet.

Before he could take a step, Wilson pressed the trigger. The automatic roared in the stillness of the room and the boy slumped down, a neat hole oozing blood in the centre of his forehead.

The telephone yelped on Wilson's desk, making him suddenly taut with the shock of it. He gaped at the instrument as if he had never seen it before, licked his lips, put the gun back, closed the drawer.

Picking up the phone, he said, hoarsely, 'Wilson speaking.' His gaze rested absently on the tiny visor which slowly swirled and cleared.

A voice came through saying, 'Sorry I had to walk out on you when I went to the door half an hour back.'

'Eh? What was that?'

'I've never seen anyone create a cleavage in public, so maybe it is thought vulgar. If so, I apologize.' A brief pause, then, 'Anyway, it's three o'clock, Mr. Wilson, and I've had to call my astral body back.'

At that point Wilson's eyes finally registered the face in the visor. He dropped the phone as if it were red-hot, shot to his feet, stared at the door which had not opened, the empty couch, the completely empty room.

He didn't say a word. Not a word. Just leaned on his desk while sickness pounded in his stomach and small pearls of sweat broke through his forehead.

This One's On Me

THE shop was small, dingy and halfway down a side street no wider than an alley. One could pass it a thousand times without giving it a thought. But above the green curtains across its window was a small sign reading: *Mutants For Sale.*

Jensen popped his eyes and went in.

'I'll have six,' he said.

'That's being greedy,' reproved the little man behind the counter. He had a white mane, watery eyes, a crimson nose and a perpetual sniffle. If he had any brothers they were hanging around Snow White.

'Look,' invited Jensen, staring around. 'Let's be serious, shall we? Let's come down to earth.'

'I'm there already.' He stamped a foot to prove it.

'I should hope so,' said Jensen. He leaned on the counter, fastened the dwarf with his gaze. 'These mutants, how do they come?'

'Fat and thin,' informed the other. 'Also tall and short. Likewise loony and sane. If there are limits I've yet to find them.'

'I know who's the loony,' Jensen decided.

'You should,' agreed the little man.

'I'm a newspaper columnist,' Jensen offered.

'That proves it,' said the other.

'Proves what?'

'Who's the loony.'

'Snappy,' opined Jensen. 'I like people who come back at me fast. Even when they're slightly cracked.'

'For a pressman you're more than impolite,' remarked the little man. He wiped his eyes, blew his nose, blinked at his visitor.

'Attribute it to my especial status. At the moment I'm a prospective customer. The customer is always right, isn't he?'

'Not necessarily.'

'You'll see the point if you want to stay in biz,' Jensen assured. He eyed the racks at back of the counter. They were lined with all sorts of phials and queer looking jars. 'About these mutants.'

'Well?'

'What's the gag?'

'I sell them. Is that a gag?'

'Y'betcha!' said Jensen. 'Know what a mutant is?'

'I ought to.'

'Sure you ought—but *do* you?'

'Most decidedly.'

'Then what is a mutant?'

'Hah!' The little man wriggled his nose. It went two shades richer in hue. 'So you don't know yourself?'

'I raise them by the dozens. I'm a leading breeder.'

'Really?' The little man registered polite incredulity. 'What's your name?'

'Jensen, Albert Edward Malachi Jensen of the *Morning Call*.'

'Never heard of you.'

'You wouldn't—if you can't read.' Jensen took a breath and went on. 'A mutant is a freak of nature created by one chance in a million. A massive particle such as a cosmic ray wallops a gene and in due time Mom has got a circus exhibit on her hands. So let me tell—'

'Wrong!' snapped the little man. 'A mutant is a radical change in psyche or physique that breeds true, regardless of whether naturally or artificially created. All my goods breed true to form, therefore they are mutants.'

'So you can change the forms of things and guarantee that they'll perpetuate their new kind?'

'That is true.'

'You must be God,' said Jensen.

'Your blasphemy is unwarranted,' said the little man, with much sharpness.

Ignoring that, Jensen studied the phials and jars a second time. 'What are those?'

'Containers.'

'I can see that much. What's in 'em—dissolved mutants?'

'Don't be absurd.'

'I am never absurd,' Jensen told him. 'You sell mutants. You've got to stash them someplace.'

'I do.'

'So it says on the window. What's the gag?'

'I tell you there isn't any.'

'All right. I'm a customer. Show me a few fashionable mutants. Something snazzy for evening wear.'

'This isn't a dress shop,' asserted the little man. 'You want a low-cut gown. And you'd look like hell in it.'

'Never mind about that. Hand me a mutant, that's all I ask.'

'Any particular kind in mind?' asked the little man.

Jensen thought it over. 'Yes. I want a pale blue rhinoceros seventeen inches long and weighing not more than nine pounds.'

'Not a stock pattern. It would have to be made.'

'I guessed as much. I had a funny feeling that there was something special about it.'

'It might take a fortnight,' warned the little man. 'Or possibly three weeks.'

'I don't doubt that. Months and years. A lifetime in fact.'

'I could find you a pink elephant,' offered the little man. 'Roughly the same size.'

'They're a drug on the market. I can find dozens of them in any saloon.'

'Yes, they are rather commonplace.' He smoothed his white hair, emitted a sigh. 'It seems that I can do nothing for you.'

Jensen said very loudly, 'Show me a mutant. Any one. The cheapest you've got.'

'Certainly.' Wiping his eyes and snuffling a couple of times, the little man went through the doorway at the back.

Leaning over the counter, Jensen helped himself to a small, peculiarly shaped jar. It was transparent and half full of orange-coloured liquid. He uncapped it and sniffed. The odour suggested prime Scotch concentrated to quarter bulk. He stuck the jar back on the shelf, drooling as he did it.

The little man returned holding a white pup with a black patch around one eye. He dumped the pup on the counter.

'There you are. Bargain line.'

'So I see,' commented Jensen. 'You ought to be sued.'

'Why?'

'That's no mutant.'

'Very well,' said the little man, with offended dignity. 'You're the authority.' Grabbing the pup he bore it through the back door.

'Wise guy!' sneered the pup at Jensen just before it went from sight.

When the shopkeeper reappeared Jensen said, 'I heard it talk. So does Charlie McCarthy and every other wooden dummy.'

'Quite probably.' He rattled the shelves with a sneeze.

'Any stage ventriloquist can do it better,' Jensen persistently continued. 'Being more polished and original.'

'Quite probably,' the little man repeated.

'I'm a sticker,' Jensen went on. 'When I find a newsworthy item I don't get pushed away. I stay right with it until something goes bang. That's me.'

'I'm sure.'

'All right, then. Look at it this way: you've got mutants for sale or so you say. That's news. There's a few lines in it—and a few lines here and there make a column.'

'Indeed?' The little man raised white eyebrows. He seemed baffled by this information.

'Now,' proceeded Jensen, looking sinister, 'a good column by a competent columnist tells all sorts of interesting things. People read it. Sometimes it tells nice things, sometimes nasty ones. The cops read the nasty ones and feel grateful because I have drawn them to their attention. Usually, though, they're too late because the subject of my remarks has also read my piece and got out of town fast, see?'

'I don't see.'

Jensen hammered the counter with an open palm. 'You have just tried to sell me a pup. It said, "Wise guy!" I heard it with my own two ears. That's false pretences. Obtaining money by means of a trick. Petty larceny.'

'But I didn't obtain any money.' The little man made a disparaging gesture. 'Money, what good is it? I never accept money.'

'You don't, eh? Then what do you want for the gabby pup?'

The little man looked cautiously around, bent forward, whispered soft and low.

Jensen went popeyed and said, 'Now I know you're cracked.'

'I go mighty short of certain types of stuff,' explained the little man apologetically. 'Inorganic material is plentiful. Animal protoplasm isn't. Takes a lot of time and trouble to make it myself.'

'I can imagine.' Jensen glanced at his watch. 'Show me one genuine dyed-in-the-wool mutant and I'll do you proud in the Sunday edition. Otherwise—'

'I'm one myself,' informed the little man, modestly.

'Is zat so? What can you do that the Navy can't?'

'I can make anything.' He paused, added, 'Well, almost anything. I'm restricted to what I can lift unaided. Nothing heavier.'

Jensen tee-heed insultingly. 'And you make other mutants?'

'Yes.'

'Then go ahead and get making. I want a pale blue rhinoceros seventeen inches long. Not more than nine pounds.'

'My powers don't function instantaneously. Manufacture takes time.'

'So you said before. A good excuse is good enough for twice.' Jensen scowled across the counter. 'Could you make a first-water rose diamond the size of a bucket?'

'If it were of any use.' The little man arshooed with violence, shoved a displaced jar back into position. 'A gem that size would be valueless. And take time to produce.'

'There you go again,' Jensen threw a significant glance at the bottle-loaded shelves. 'How much are they paying you?'

'Who?'

'The drug ring.'

'I don't understand.'

'Of course you don't.' Pushing forward his face, Jensen displayed the cynicism of one familiar with life's seamiest side. 'What it says in the window is a lot of guff. It doesn't mean what it appears to mean. A mutant is a key-word for a jar of joy-juice as your hop-headed customers well know.'

'The jars contain reduction fluids,' contradicted the little man.

'You bet they do,' Jensen endorsed. 'They've reduced many an addict's wad.' He pointed to the jar at which he had sniffed. 'How much for that one?'

'You may have it for nothing,' said the little man, giving it to him. 'But I want the empty back.'

Taking it, Jensen again uncapped and smelled. He dipped a finger, sucked it cautiously. His expression became beatific.

'I take back all that drug talk. I get the idea now.' He waved the jar, doing it gently lest he spill a drop. 'Illegal liquor, ninety-six proof and no tax.' Another finger-suck. 'All the same, somebody really knows how to make it. Somebody is a revenue-dodging expert. Count me a customer—I'll be here regularly as from now.'

With that he tried a mouthful. It was like a torchlight procession parading down his gullet.

'Youps!' He gained breath, eyed the jar with unconcealed respect. It was on the small side, holding no more than a fifth of a pint. That was a pity. He lifted it for another drink. 'This one's on me. Here's to crime!'

'You have been very rude,' remarked the little man. 'Remember that!'

Grinning at him, Jensen tilted the jar and let the rest go down. Something exploded in his belly. The walls of the shop appeared to recede to an enormous distance and then shoot back. He teetered for five seconds while strength drained out of his legs, then bowed forward and permitted the floor to smack him in the face.

Aeons swung by, one after another, long, foggy, filled with dull sounds. They ended. Jensen emerged slowly as from a bad dream.

He was on all fours on a sheet of ice or something resembling ice. He was down like a dog, also rigid and muzzy-minded. His eyes were out of focus. He shook his head to revive his wits.

Thoughts gradually fought their way into his befuddled

cranium. A drug depot. He'd found one and been too nosey. Somebody had pussied behind him. Somebody had handed him a large lump on the pate. What comes of talking out loud and asking too many questions.

'You've been very rude. Remember that!'

Rude nothing. Pretty soon, when he could pull himself together and regain his health and strength, he'd become downright vulgar. He would take the little man apart and strew the pieces around.

The eyes got working more or less, mostly less. They remained peculiarly and horribly short-sighted. His nose was functioning topnotch; it could smell umpteen things at once, including an overheated engine someplace fifty yards away. But the eyes remained poor.

All the same, he could see now that the ice was not ice It was more like plate glass, thick and cold. There was another sheet of it far below him and another below that. Also a strong wire grille fronting the lot.

He tried to come erect but his back was stiff and refused to bend. His legs wouldn't obey his will. What a thumper he must have caught! Still on all fours, he edged nearer the imprisoning grille, doing it with some sort of lethargic ponderousness. Voices sounded somewhere nearby but out of sight.

'She insists on a telepathic saluki and that's what it's got to be.'

'It will take ten days,' answered the little man's tones.

'Her birthday is Saturday week. Sure you can have it ready for then?'

'I'm positive.'

'That's fine. Go ahead with it. I'll bring you a fat one when I come to collect.'

Jensen screwed up his eyes and squinted myopically through the grille at a shiny surface opposite. More glass fronting another row of wired-in but empty shelves. There were vague, elusive shadow-pictures on it. Something like a distant window with words across. The words were reversed and took him some time to spell them out: *Mutants For Sale.*

His gaze lowered to his own level, saw something else reflected a good deal more clearly. He moved to one side. It moved likewise He shook his head. So did the other. He opened his mouth and the mirage opened with him.

Then he screamed bloody murder—but only a tiny snort came forth. The reflection also snorted.

It was pale blue, seventeen inches long and had a horn on its ugly nose.

I Hear You Calling

A FRIGHTENED town, dark and deadly. A minor name on a vast map. Formerly noteworthy for nothing save the idle rumour that a flying saucer had landed nearby. That had been a month ago and proved baseless. Police and pressmen scoured the outskirts. No saucer.

This event faded, lost significance as hunters took off in pursuit of something else, something weightier and more urgent that cleared the streets by night. On the main stem a few dusty, neglected neons glowed over empty bars while cops lurked in shadowy doorways, watched cats playing leapfrog and jumping low.

Widgey Bullock knew nothing of this. To him the town had its virtues. That was why he had just arrived there. It was forty miles from port, devoid of naval patrols, officers, pickpockets and the same old bunch of painted trollops. A new landfall. A place where a naval stoker first-class could roll the boat without getting tossed into the brig.

Entering a likely bar, he shoved his pork-pie on to the back of his head, said, 'I'm in the mood, Mac. Give me an Atom Bomb.'

'What might that be?' inquired the barman. He was a fat sample, pasty-faced with too little sun, too little sleep.

'I should have to tell you?' Widgey hitched his lean bulk on a stool, rubbed blue jowls. 'Equal parts rum, tequila and vodka. Add a pinch of red pepper and shake.'

'God!' said the other. He slopped it together, vibrated it, slid it across. Then he watched warily as if awaiting the mushroom cloud.

Widgey poured some down. He twitched his scalp and the cap jerked with it.

'What a joint,' he commented, staring around. 'No juke-box, no dames, no company, nobody but you and me. Where's everybody?'

'Home,' said the barman. He nodded toward the wall-clock. 'Ten thirty and it's dark.'

'Mean to say the town's closed down?' Widgey tipped the cap over his eyes, stared incredulously. 'Ten thirty's the time for

things to start livening up. The place should get jumping around midnight.'

'Not here,' said the barman. His gaze drifted toward the door, came back. He didn't seem to know what might enter next but obviously didn't want it, not at any price.

'What's wrong with here?' demanded Widgey, ignoring the door.

'Folk are getting themselves killed.'

'How's that? Somebody feuding?'

'They just lie around dead,' said the barman. 'Dead and empty.'

'Empty?'

'No blood,' said the barman.

'Give me another,' Widgey ordered, poking his glass. He got it, took a deep gulp, coughed with the fire of it. 'Now let's have this straight. Who's being killed?'

'One here, one there,' the other said. 'Mostly strangers.'

'I'm a stranger myself,' Widgey pointed out. 'Does that put me on the list?'

'Wouldn't be surprised.'

'What a dump!' Widgey complained. 'Forty miles I come for bright lights and freedom. What do I get? A hick town heading for bed and a barkeep measuring my corpse.'

'Sorry,' said the other, 'But you might as well know.' He waved a hand to emphasize the sheer emptiness of the place. 'This is just the way it's been every night for the last three weeks. When I go home I keep close by the wall and wear my eyes in my pants the whole way. I keep my door locked twice over.'

'How many,' asked Widgey, 'have been laid and emptied?'

'Twelve so far. Next one will be number thirteen.'

'What are the cops doing about it?'

'Looking,' said the barman. 'What else can they do?'

'This sounds like a bar-yarn to me,' observed Widgey, suspiciously. 'Are you figuring on getting rid of me and shutting shop early?'

'Dead wrong,' the barman told him. 'It's all in the papers. A dry stiff every other night.' He eyed the door again. 'Besides, I can't close up when I like and I need the company.'

'I'll say you do.' Widgey assured. 'Fellow your weight will have buckets of blood. You're a major target.'

'Shut up!' said the barman, looking sick.

'I'm not worrying,' Widgey went on. 'Just one night here and back to the ship tomorrow. After that, you can have this lousy town and welcome.' He took a long swig, smacked his lips. 'Know of any other joint where there'd be more than two of us?'

'No. Not at this time.'

'Well, d'you know of an address where I can knock three times and ask for Mabel?'

'Think I'm a pimp?' asked the barman, frowning.

'I think you ought to know your way around seeing this is your own stamping ground.'

'It isn't mine. I've been here only a couple of months.' He wiped the back of his neck, peered toward the street. 'That's what scares me. I rank as a stranger too.'

'Take it easy,' Widgey advised. 'When you're dead and empty you won't know it even if you look like a slack sack.' He poked the glass again. 'Make it a double. If you can't give me an address I'll have to do without. Maybe I can drink myself beyond what I have in mind.'

The barman said, 'Any more you'd better take with you. This is where I shut shop.'

Widgey pointed to a yellow bottle. 'I'll take that.' He fumbled clumsily in a pocket, dug out money and paid. A couple of coins fell to the floor. He teetered as he picked them up.

'It's working on you,' said the barman.

'Which is all that is,' said Widgey.

Pocketing the bottle he rolled out with a decided list to starboard. The street was a mess of greys and blacks, the neons gone. A thin sliver of moon rode above bulging clouds.

He headed uncertainly for the crummy hotel where he'd booked a room. A leering tomcat slunk across his path, wanting the same as he did. Hidden in the dark entrance to an alley a policeman watched his passing, made no sound to betray his presence. On the other side of the road a woman hurried along, wary and fearful.

'Hi, Babe!' he hoarsed across, not caring whether she were hot or cold, young or old.

She broke into a near-run, her heels making a fast and urgent *clop-clop*. Widgey stood watching her and swearing under his breath. The policeman emerged from the alley, kept an eye on both of them. The woman stopped two hundred yards down, frantically stabbed a key at a door, went into a house. The slam of the door sounded like the crack of doom.

'Bet they say their prayers, too,' scoffed Widgey.

Alcoholically aggrieved, he lurched onward, found the hotel, climbed upstairs. Savagely he flung his cap across the room, pulled off his jacket and shied it the same way, kicked his shoes under the bed. He spent a minute examining himself in the mirror

over the washbasin, pawing his ears and making faces at himself. Then he went to the window and looked out at the night.

There was another woman on the road below. She drifted along in a strange unhurried manner, an undulating glide like that of a column of grey smoke wafted by a gentle breeze. She was blurry as if draped and veiled. A lot of things look blurry when a man has heavy cargo under the hatches.

But a woman is a woman. One who travels late and without haste is always a good prospect, thought Widgey. Slipping the catch, he opened the window and leaned out. No cops were visible. Nobody but the vague figure.

'Yoohoo!'

It achieved nothing. Perhaps she hadn't heard.

'*Yoohoo*!'

The figure stopped. Moonlight was too poor to show which way she was looking but at least her halt was encouraging.

'YOOHOO!' bawled Widgey, bending farther out and throwing discretion to the winds. He waved an energetic arm.

The figure made a vague gesture, crossed the road toward the hotel. Closing the window, Widgey delightedly tried a slow soft shoe routine but his balance had gone to pot. Seas were rough tonight.

He left his door a couple of inches ajar so she would know which room was which. Hurriedly he cleaned a couple of glasses by sloshing water around them, put them on the bedside table along with the yellow bottle.

A timid knock sounded.

'Come in!' He spat on his hands, used them to brush back his hair, fixed a welcoming grin on his face.

The knocker came in.

Widgey backed away fast, then more slowly as strength flowed out of his legs. His grin had vanished and he'd gone cold sober in one-fifth of a second. He wanted to yell bloody murder but couldn't emit a squeak.

The edge of the bed caught behind his retreating knees. He flopped backward, lay on the bed with chest and throat exposed. He couldn't do a thing to save himself, not a damn thing.

It glided soundlessly to the bedside, bent over and looked at him with eyes that were black pinheads set deeply in green fluff. Its long, elastic mouth came out and pouted like the nozzle of a fire-hose. The last that Widgey ever heard was a whisper from a million miles away.

'*I am Yuhu. You called me.*'

Wisel

THERE were six of us in the stuffy compartment of the old-fashioned railroad coach. The compartment was one of those five-seats-a-side affairs dating back a couple of decades, and the coach itself was a lumbering monstrosity of the kind that occasionally gets exhumed to relieve abnormal pressure on rolling stock.

Opposite me sat a fat man named Joe. I knew that was his name because he was so addressed by the slightly less fat man squatting at his side. The latter's name was Al. The opposing corner of the same seat was occupied by a travelling salesman with weary but calculating eyes. Facing him, at the other end of my own seat, was a young couple married just long enough to converse without cooing.

For the last seventy miles Joe and Al had analyzed the political situation in reverberating undertones and with sweaty morbidity. The salesman had divided his attention between their conversation, a dog-eared copy of the *Heating Engineer's Manual,* and the young couple's amateurish impression of marital old-timers.

With many rumbles and several jolts the long train snaked its way through a grid of maybe fifty criss-crossing lines. Air hissed under the coaches as they came to a stop. Joe and Al fell silent. We could hear doors banging and slamming as people got out and others got in.

'Manhanigan,' said the salesman, rubbing condensation from his window and peering through. 'And it's raining like the very devil.'

Then the door to our compartment was suddenly jerked open and a little man scrambled in. Carefully, he closed the door behind him, beamed upon us all, selected a seat on the side opposite me, halfway between Al and the drummer.

'Some downpour,' he remarked, mopping rain from his face with a large, purple handkerchief. 'Beautiful!' He beamed again, and sighed ecstatically. 'All that water!'

In the usual way, all eyes examined the newcomer. He was a new factor in our idle hour, a fresh circumstance to relieve our boredom. Erect and amiable, his small feet set together on the

floor, he sat nursing his bag on his lap and tolerated our scrutiny.

He had a plump, clean-shaven face surrounding a puckish mouth. His hair was iron-grey, rather long, very curly. His torso was small, slightly paunchy, and his legs were just long enough to reach the floor. Only his eyes were remarkable: they were very alert, very much alive.

'Train's rather late, folks,' he said, brightly.

'We're running twelve minutes behind schedule,' the salesman informed. 'There's trouble higher up the line.' He leaned sidewise, tried to look discreetly at the little man's bag.

'Too bad,' said the little man. 'Promptitude is one essential of efficiency.'

'And what,' asked the salesman, grinning, 'might be the others?'

'Energy, foresight and imagination,' responded the little man, complacently. He smiled paternally upon the young couple, who immediately resumed their interest in each other.

The salesman subsided, riffled the pages of his book. Joe ceased his rumblings at Al, said, 'Huh?' and stared across his companion's stomach toward the newly arrived oracle. The little man shifted his sociable beam to me.

It was then I noticed his bag. The salesman was still sneaking looks at it. An unusual bag. It was cylindrical in shape, with a handle in the middle of its length, and it seemed to be made of a very exotic type of snakeskin. There wasn't any visible opening, nor anything that looked like a lock. I could just glimpse a brilliantly coloured sticker on the end nearest the salesman.

After a couple of minutes, I lost interest, rubbed the window, watched the rain-drenched scenery as it rushed past at sixty miles an hour. We covered thirty miles before my attention returned. Al and Joe were now silent, sunk into a coma of porcine rumination. But the salesman was studying the imperturable little man with furtive intensity, and the newlyweds also had their eyes upon him.

Following the young couple's gaze, I found they were looking at the bag. Its owner had turned it around in his lap so that its end now faced us. We could see the sticker plainly. It looked lurid. A printed piece of glossy paper about six inches by four, in brilliant colours, it depicted an enormous building resembling a great pink pyramid set with a thousand windows. A bold line of wavy print ran underneath. The print looked like Arabic.

'How long,' asked the little man, 'will it take to Farburg?'

'About another ten minutes,' I told him. He seemed anxious to converse. My eyes returned to the bag.

'Thank you very much,' he responded, with extreme politeness. His smile was all-embracing.

Funny thing, that adornment on his bag. I'd been around plenty in my time, and had collected labels, tags and stickers all the way from Leopoldsville to Tongatabu—but I'd never seen one like the one he'd got. Neither had I ever encountered script of the sort printed under his picture. What was it, Persian, Sanscrit, Arabic or Bashi-Bazouk?

The salesman displayed more enterprise than any of us. Cocking an inquisitive eye, he said:

'Stranger around these parts?'

'Oh, quite!' assured the little man, very definitely.

He was willing enough to talk, but he wasn't making the conversation. That sticker of his tantalized me. Where did they use writing of that sort, and what was the country where they had skyscrapers like pink pyramids?

No harm in asking, anyway. I hated being thought unduly nosey—but he seemed far too easy-going to resent a question or two. The young couple were still staring fascinatedly at the label, the salesman was still fidgeting around in his attempts to examine it once more, and even Al and Joe were becoming conscious of the presence of something interesting. As the train hammered over a junction, the bag trembled on its owner's plump little knees. Colours shifted and flickered deep within the surface of the snakeskin.

'I beg your pardon, Mr.—er—?'

'Wisel,' said the little man, looking supremely gratified. 'My name is Wisel.'

'Thank you. Mine's Russell. I don't wish to appear impertinent, but that sticker you've got on your bag—'

'Ah, yes, the sticker,' he said. 'An hotel label. You know how they slap them on. Quite decorative when you have a collection.'

'I'm curious concerning the building pictured on it.'

'Oh, that!' Everyone was sitting up by now. 'That's the Red Range Hotel.'

'And the writing?' I persisted. 'I must confess it's strange to me.'

He beamed, and said:

'The writing is pure Comric, a streamlined script, what you might call a form of shorthand.'

'Really?' I mouthed, completely defeated. 'Thanks!' I gave it up. In a way, I felt sorry I'd asked.

He edged the bag around to a more comfortable position, still clinging to it tightly. Al and Joe now got a full view of the subject under discussion. The fat pair mooned at it unimaginatively. A strange silence pervaded the compartment and remained while the train snaked a bend and trundled into Farburg. I got up, struggled into my raincoat, made ready to depart. So did the little man.

The salesman couldn't stand it any longer. His calculating eyes became desperate as the mysterious Wisel stood by the door, bag in one hand, waiting for the train to stop.

'Say, mister, where in hell is the Red Range Hotel, and who in hell writes pure Comric?'

The train stopped.

'Mars and the Martians,' said Wisel, calmly. Then he opened the door and stepped out.

I got out right behind him, glanced back into the compartment. Al and Joe were glooming through the open door with slightly shocked expressions. Back of them, the drummer was leaning forward addressing the newlyweds with much bitterness.

He was saying to them:

'See that? He comes along with a gag and I bite! Doggone it, he walks in with a gag and I bite on it!'

I caught up with the little man as he trotted swiftly toward the exit. He looked up and smiled as he saw me.

'You don't believe it,' he asserted, happily. 'Neither does anyone else. It's handy, you know. Enables me to go places without overmuch bother.'

Hardly knowing what to make of him, I asked:

'Where are you going?'

'Looking around, looking around,' he replied, airily. 'Naturally, I wish to see all I can and learn all I can in the time that is available.' He beamed up at me, his bag swinging in his hand. 'D'you know, I was led to believe that I'd be hunted to death like a desert *yoogar*. But no! Not a soul believes anything, and that simplifies my task.'

'Brother,' I said, 'it sure is an awfully hard story to swallow.' We slowed down as the existing crowd reached the bottleneck of the barrier. I got out my ticket.

He went in front of me. I was watching him closely, very closely. With the utmost nonchalance, he offered the waiting

collector an empty hand. Casually, the collector took nothing out of the hand, snipped the piece of invisibility with his clippers, tossed it into a box. Then he took my ticket.

I was still dazed when Wisel said:

'So pleased to have met you! Farewell!' and scrambled into a waiting hack.

My mind was in a whirl, mostly occupied with suspicions concerning my own sight. I looked at the hack, I looked at passers-by. He must have hypnotized that collector. There wasn't any other explanation.

The taxi's engine started up just as I reached it. I stuck my head in the window, opened my mouth to say something, found myself staring straight into the ireful eyes of a white-haired, full bosomed old dowager. She stabbed me through raised lorgnettes.

'Young man!' she snapped.

'Sorry, lady,' I apologized.

Then the cab was off. I watched it purr down the ramp and into the street. Darn it, I'd seen Wisel get into that hack right under my very nose. He couldn't be a Martian—that was all baloney. And even if he was, he couldn't change himself at a moment's notice into a matronly old duck.

He just couldn't.

No, he couldn't.

Couldn't he?

Letting out a wild yell I rushed after that hack. Too late of course, Wisel or not, she'd been holding his bag.

The Ponderer

THE great tree-topped cliff towered hugely in the sunlight and cast its broad, deep shadow across the flat strip of land which lay between it and the jungle. At the centre of the cliff, running its full height from base to crest, jutted an immense outcrop of solid grey rock fantastically moulded into semblance of a ruminating giant. Though craggy and rugged, old and worn, so startlingly did it look like a gargantuan statue of someone dreaming of ages long forgotten that ever since the days of the vanished Chiapans it had been named The Ponderer—and mightily feared.

Overhead, the coppery sky of Chiapas poured heat into the rocks, the flat strip and the jungle. To the south lay Palenque with its creeper-covered ruins of a civilization absorbed into the mist of antiquity. There too, in Palenque, was the nearest *finca* where a humble peon could slake his thirst and at the same time rid himself of the eerie feeling induced by this eternally brooding colossus.

Clumsily turning his mule at the end of the strip and edging his primitive stick-plough around behind it, Jose Felipe Eguerola paused to mop his lean, nutbrown face, lick his cracked lips and wave away a horde of mosquitoes. Deep within the jungle to one side of him unseen things yapped and squealed and howled derisively. To his other side soared the cliff and its part-embedded monster of stone. The shadow of The Ponderer's tremendous head slanted far across the lines of new, thin furrows, so high in the sky was it poised.

Jose Felipe Eguerola scrupulously avoided looking directly at the dour shape of The Ponderer. He never gave it eye for eye, never. To do so would be bad. He'd not the remotest notion of why it might be bad, but he was taking no chances. Already he was taking chances enough, in the opinions of some.

Fra Benedictus with his holy water and a few crazy Yanquis with cameras had been the only ones to practise the precept that a cat may look at a king. Nothing terrible had happened to any of them as far as he knew. But he, Jose Felipe Eguerola, had never owned a pair of rawhide sandals, never fascinated a plump

senorita, never gained a peso in the State lottery. All that he possessed were a grass hut pleasingly adjacent to the *finca,* seven acres of perilous dirt, the stick-plough, the mule, one pair of torn pants, the sputum of the gods and the will to live despite it. His chief aim in life was to keep what little he'd got.

So for the twentieth time that day he shifted his quid of raw latex from one cheek to the other, turned the end of a furrow, beat off the mosquitoes, glanced hastily and leeringly at The Ponderer from out the corners of his black and liquid eyes. In spite of the intense heat the usual shiver raced up his spine. So big, so grandly contemplative, so imperially indifferent to the scrabblings of lesser things around its mountainous feet!

Tilting his hand-woven straw sombrero the better to shield his eyes, Jose Felipe whacked the tough, drab buttocks in front of him and set up an urgent call of, '*Mula, Mula, Mula, Echa, mula*!' Obediently the animal lurched forward. Leaning his weight on the plough he followed bare-footed, splay-toed.

High above, The Ponderer meditated in utter disregard of the tiny, buglike figures, two and four-footed, as they crawled dustily toward the shadow he was casting. He had posed there so long and eroded so much that none could tell for certain whether he had been carved by oldtime hands of wondrous cunning, or whether he was no more than a freakish product of the elements.

In awful truth, he was neither. The few who had viewed him and theorized about him had erred by rejecting the self-evident in favour of the obscure. He was precisely what he appeared to be, namely, The Ponderer. In that respect if in no other, the wary Jose Felipe's sixth sense was more reliable than the erudition of his betters.

Hesitantly, man and beast toiled through the potent shadow, emerged into the light. Jose Felipe coughed with dust and relief. Invariably he was relieved to escape that darker patch. At any other time, in any other place, he had the true peon's love of the shade; it provided a break from the burning sun, something in which to laze luxuriously, something in which to lie flat on one's back with one's half-naked legs stretched right out. One could then listen idly to the wit of the fat, inactive Senor Don Antonio Miguel Gautisolo-y-Lazares who could both read and write, 'Let the Yanquis work—they are more advanced.'

But not here. Not in that particular shadow. Not in that low-slung silhouette of a countenance which kept away Indians and peons alike, preserving the plot from all but the supremely

courageous such as he, Jose Felipe Eguerola. Frequently he regretted that his courage was so supreme. Back in Palenque he was much admired for his hardihood and there had been some talk of it even in far-off Villahermosa. It was gratifying to be admired providing that one was gratified in Palenque, preferably in the *finca*. On this shadow-haunted plot he was called upon to pay the devil for the praise—and the price got upped a bit every day. There were no admirers upon the scene of action; there was only himself and the mule and the monstrous monolith to whose feet even the hungry jungle had dared not push.

Reaching the farther end, he turned mule and plough again, mopped, whoosed the mosquitoes, retilted the sombrero, cautiously eyed the cliff. '*Ho, mula. Mula. Echa, mula*!' The cry wailed and hooted along the rocky ramparts, bounding and rebounding from crevices and corners. '*Mula . . . Echa, mula*!' Parrots screamed in the impenetrable thickness of the green hell, a distant branch snapped and something thrashed heavily amid the growths. '*Echa, mula*!'

The Ponderer awoke.

With slow, titanic deliberation awful to watch, The Ponderer shifted the columnar arm which had propped his head, and removed his massive elbow from his hillock of a knee. His entire tremendous torso edged the merest fraction with this his first movement; the ramparts shuddered along their length and two thousand tons of rock roared down from the cliff's face a mile away. Its sound was like the simultaneous sundering of earth and sky. The jungle yelled its own dumbfoundment with a multitude of hidden voices.

The mule had stopped in its tracks, ears twitching uneasily. Jose Felipe stood paralyzed behind it, not looking up, but down—down to the furrows where the shadow of the elbow had left the shadow of the knee and still was moving. The handles of the plough were wet in his failing grip. Sluggishly, unwillingly, he turned.

His heart at once became a river eel striving to snap at the hawk-moth fluttering within his stomach. Tiny streams of sweat crept down the bridge of his nose, the backs of his ears, the insides of his knees. The muscles of his jaws, thighs and abdomen felt strangely weak. His head was dizzy as if he had stooped too long beneath the merciless sun. He could not move, not one muscle, not one inch. He remained there glued to the earth, as fixed for all time as had seemed the thing he was watching.

Gradually, laboriously, with many harsh sounds as of stone grinding upon stone, The Ponderer came unstuck from the cliff. An avalanche of rock, pebbles and dirt cascaded on either side of him, its dust clouding his feet. Great boulders hopped and hurled across the flat, some missing the tranfixed onlooker by mere yards. With groaning joints The Ponderer straightened, became rigidly erect, at which point his shadow reached the jungle and hushed its agitated crying. The brazen sky glared down while even the birds were silent. The world was awed.

The Ponderer sighed. It was a sibilant sound like that of a venturesome wind lost amid unfamiliar mountains. Then without warning, and with many rasping noises, he bent and grabbed the mule. Its plough-cords broke as he snatched it three hundred feet into the air. Holding it upside-down, its legs kicking furiously, he studied it with mild interest and a touch of contempt. Just as derisively he put it back on the ground where it lay on its side and panted heavily, tongue out, eyes rolling. Still Jose Felipe remained helplessly rooted to the fateful spot.

As the great hand came for him, Jose called pitifully upon his legs, and called in vain. They refused to respond. The hand closed about him, huge and harsh and hard, a rocky enormity. Opening his mouth, he shrieked on a note so high in pitch that his own ears could not hear it. At terrifying speed he went upward within the hand, his mouth still wide open and emitting the sound which was not a sound.

Nightmarishly he swung close to that immense face, that craggy, lined, corroded travesty of a face. It stared at him, examining him with two granite bulges sculpturally suggestive of eyes and somehow he knew that it could really see—or exercise some queer sense equivalent to sight.

'*Santa Maria*!' Jose Felipe's dangling legs jerked spasmodically.

'Be still!' The Ponderer had no visible mouth, no more than a deeply carved indication of lips, yet he spoke as clearly and surely as the talking Memnon had spoken, and the other could understand his words.

'Be still, little thing who mocks my own shape and form.' He turned his captive around, the better to inspect him. His grip was crushing. Jose Felipe screamed again with the sheer agony of it. The fingers loosened slightly.

'So,' decided The Ponderer, 'this creature has mastery of the other one. This one *thinks*. Well, well!' He chuckled in amused surprise. 'You really do think, little one—that is something indeed! I, too, think. What else can one do that is worthwhile? What

greater ecstasy can there be than that of sustained and involved thought?'

'*Maria*!' repeated Jose Felipe fervently. His eyes were turned away from that great face and gazing in dread at the drop beneath the hand. From his altitude the mule resembled a mouse. The sight brought on vertigo. He tried to keep well within the cup of the hand, clinging to the fingers. His tattered, sweat-soaked pants had moulded themselves to his legs.

'Only in thought may one avoid the torment of endless years,' The Ponderer went on. 'The long thought, the complicated thought—that is the fundamental pleasure.' He crooked a finger which rasped as it bent, used it to nudge his victim. 'Isn't it?'

'No!' shouted Jose Felipe hardly knowing what he was hearing or saying. '*Si! Si!*' He strove to keep his eyes away from both the fall and the face.

'Alas, I have arrived at the end of a beautiful problem,' The Ponderer continued morbidly. 'The problem of nine bodies circling a binary, the sixth being retrograde. It has kept me petrified with the pleasure of thought for seventy thousand years.' He paused a moment, added, 'Or was it seven thousand? I don't know. It is of no consequence and not worth investigating —the solution is too swift and easy.' He juggled his huge hand. 'But I would guess, little one, that even a simple puzzle would be too much for your kind, eh?'

The jiggling jerked his tongue free, and Jose Felipe promptly used it to shout, 'Put me down! Put me down and I will leave your feet in peace! I swear it by—'

'Be silent!' The hand wobbled again. 'Now I am sorely in need of another thought. I yearn to be numbed by a new problem. How unhappy is the silicoid without a problem!' His tremendous thumb caught the victim on the point of sliding helplessly into space, poked him back into the palm. 'You, little thing, have a fragmentary life which does not extend from one of my gravitic pulses to the next, and probably any puzzle you could concoct would be equally as short and futile. Yet I need a long one, I need one enjoyable for aeons.

'By my father and my mother, I shall never again tread upon your shade or come within sight of here if but—'

'Quiet! Let me consider how I might convert you into a suitable problem.' The rocky head came a little closer, staring, staring blindly. 'Suppose that I squeeze you? Ah, yes, you will die! Sooner or later others of your kind will come seeking you. I shall squeeze

them also. The mystery will grow with the mound of corpses. The tales of it will spread like ripples when a stone has been cast into a pond. Eventually other little things with minds superior to yours will come here to investigate the matter. If I persist, if I go far enough, someone will solve the mystery and employ whatever is available to shatter me to dust.'

'I do not wish to die,' yelled Jose Felipe. 'I do not deserve to die.' The jungle came back to life and its parrots screamed in sympathy.

'Now possibly *there* is a problem,' mused The Ponderer completely ignoring his captive's protests. 'Somewhat on the short side, but spiced with danger. Can I cast the stone and accurately estimate the speed, distance and amplitude of those ripples? Can I start the chain of circumstance, petrify myself in thought, and awake in good time with the solution of how to avoid my own destruction?' His chuckle sounded again. 'This is something decidedly novel; a puzzle loaded with death, my own death. It entices me, yes, it entices me.' His fingers began to curl and close in.

'Have pity!' gasped the victim, barely finding breath under the awful compression.

The fingers relaxed. 'Pity? What a weird concept! Has it an inherent problem?' The Ponderer was silent awhile. 'No, I cannot conceive one.' More silence, then, 'However, I understand what you mean. If I grant you some of this pity it may complicate matters pleasingly. I will therefore grant it by playing a little game with you.'

'Put me down. Let me go.'

'Not yet. Not just yet—if at all! The game first.' The granite eyes were fixed upon him, but blank, blank. 'This is the game: I shall release you unhurt if your wits prove the equal of mine. If you can petrify me you will have earned your freedom. So think, little one, *think*. It is you versus a silicord!'

'Petrify you?' Jose Felipe's mind refused to make sense of the words. His fear was still a potent thing, but anger was outgrowing it.

'With a problem. And not some petty puzzle which can be solved within the space of a gravitic pulse, but one worthy of my time, a long, long, time.' He tilted the hand slightly. 'Come on, petrify me with thought—that you may live!'

Jose Felipe clung desperately to a rocky finger, slid, hung on, slid a bit more. He fought to discipline his scattered wits. He was

no intellectual and none knew it better than he. Perhaps of bravery supreme—in given circumstances—but far, far from a genius. Offhand, he could remember nobody who'd ever given him credit for an original thought. Even the mild and inoffensive Fra Benedictus had once pronounced him too stupid to live. Evidently the worthy father had been only too right—for his end was near.

Fra Benedictus!

Had called him stupid!

Why?

Fra—

'Be swift!' The hand slanted alarmingly. 'Only the witless are slow!'

Sliding to the verge, Jose Felipe struggled madly to keep his grip while his legs swung in mid-air. Below, the mouse! He could see it in his mind's eye, miles and miles down, a crushed form besides it—the bait, the first link in the hellish chain of circumstance. He tore his nails in frantic effort to stay put.

'Quick!'

More tilt.

A sudden surge of appalling fury filled his being, overwhelming his fear, lending him strength of desperation. Arcing his body he swung himself onto a great finger, stood upon it erect, at full height, one hand braced against the other's tilted palm. His black, volatile eyes blazing with anger, he shook an absurd little fist at the enormous face, for the first time defying it eye to eye. His voice was shrill, vibrant with emotion as he challenged The Ponderer.

'To whom did God say, "Let there be light!"?'

'Eh?'

Without caring whether it were true or false, the monster accepted the premise for the sake of where it led. His great hand levelled slowly, trembled, began to sink. It went down, gradually down, shivering queerly as it moved. Jose Felipe fell off it when within six feet of earth, landed heavily on his knees, got up and raced twenty paces before he fainted. Dimly and faraway in the instant before his senses left him he heard a grinding, rasping voice high up in the sky.

'To whom?'

The vault of Chiapas was still brazen and hot when his senses returned and he staggered to his feet. Likewise upright and apparently unharmed, the mule was nearby surveying him dolefully. He leaned against the animal, absorbing the comfort of its presence. He tried not to look over its back, but his eyes were

drawn as if by a magnet and insisted on seeing. The panorama appeared normal. The mighty ramparts frowned down just as always they had done, and the queer, fantastic outcrop was solidly a part of them as always it had been. The outcrop bore strange and startling resemblance to a brooding giant, a colossus plunged in eternal thought.

Looking longer and with less reluctance, Jose Felipe berated himself. Obviously the supreme courage which was spoken of even in Villahermosa was but the courage of drunken dreams. He sat too often and too long in the *finca*, too stupid to know whether the *tequila* was good or bad—almost too stupid to live. What little there was of his brains had been pickled in a potent jug so that next day he fell even behind the plough and battled against the mountains in his stupor.

Moodily he felt for the plough-cords, found them broken. His eyes sought the torn ends. They popped, roamed around, perceived the great fall a mile to the north, the boulders scattered over the flat, the new rubble at either side of the outcrop. His sombrero lay at the outcrop's base. Even as he looked a loosened crag beyond the distant fall gave way and dropped thunderously into a ravine. Its noise echoed and re-echoed, reaching him like a great, booming voice.

'To whom? To *whom*?'

'*Madre de Dios*!' Madly scrambling onto the mule's back and urging its head round to face the Palenque trail, Jose Felipe Eguerola sweated and forgot the mosquitoes while he hammered his mouth with his heels until it broke into a steady jog-trot. '*Mula. Mula. Echa, mula*!'

Sole Solution

He brooded in darkness and there was no-one else. Not a voice, not a whisper. Not the touch of a hand. Not the warmth of another heart.

Darkness.

Solitude.

Eternal confinement where all was black and silent and nothing stirred. Imprisonment without prior condemnation. Punishment without sin. The unbearable that had to be borne unless some mode of escape could be devised.

No hope of rescue from elsewhere. No sorrow or sympathy or pity in another soul, another mind. No doors to be opened, no locks to be turned, no bars to be sawn apart. Only the thick, deep sable night in which to fumble and find nothing. Circle a hand to the right and there is nought. Sweep an arm to the left and discover emptiness utter and complete. Walk forward through the darkness like a blind man lost in a vast, forgotten hall and there is no floor, no echo of footsteps, nothing to bar one's path.

He could touch and sense one thing only. And that was self.

Therefore the only available resources with which to overcome his predicament were those secreted within himself. He must be the instrument of his own salvation.

How?

No problem is beyond solution. By that thesis science lives. Without it, science dies. He was the ultimate scientist. As such, he could not refuse this challenge to his capabilities.

His torments were those of boredom, loneliness, mental and physical sterility. They were not to be endured. The easiest escape is via the imagination. One hangs in a straight-jacket and flees the corporeal trap by adventuring in a dreamland of one's own.

But dreams are not enough. They are unreal and all too brief. The freedom to be gained must be genuine and of long duration. That meant he must make a stern reality of dreams, a reality so contrived that it would persist for all time. It must be self-perpetuating. Nothing less would make escape complete.

So he sat in the great dark and battled the problem. There was

no clock, no calendar to mark the length of thought. There was no external data upon which to compute. There was nothing, nothing except the workings within his agile mind.

And one thesis: no problem is beyond solution.

He found it eventually. It meant escape from everlasting night. It would provide experience, companionship, adventure, mental exercise, entertainment, warmth, love, the sound of voices, the touch of hands.

The plan was anything but rudimentary. On the contrary it was complicated enough to defy untangling for endless eons. It had to be like that to have permanence. The unwanted alternative was swift return to drear silence and the bitter dark.

It took a deal of working out. A million and one aspects had to be considered along with all their diverse effects upon each other. And when that was done he had to cope with the next million. And so on . . . on . . . on.

He created a mighty dream of his own, a place of infinite complexity schemed in every detail to the last dot and comma. Within this he would live anew. But not as himself. He was going to dissipate his person into numberless parts, a tremendous multitude of variegated shapes and forms each of which would have to battle its own peculiar environment.

And he would toughen the struggle by unthinking himself, handicapping his parts with appalling ignorance and leaving them to learn afresh. He would seed enmity between them by dictating the basic rules of the game. Those who obeyed would be called good. Those who did not would be called bad. There would be conflicts within the one great conflict.

When all was ready and prepared he intended to disrupt and become not one but an enormous host of entities. Then his parts must fight their way back to unity and himself.

But first he must make reality of the dream. Ah, that was the test!

The time was now. The experiment must begin.

Leaning forward, he gazed into the dark and said, 'Let there be light.'

And there was light.

Rhythm of the Rats

THE village of despair lay in a fold of tree-shrouded hills. Its name shall not be spoken, neither shall its nationality be told. There are those among us whose curiosity knows no restraint; others who are magnetically drawn by the dreadful. One must tell the tale in manner calculated to protect the foolish from their follies or not tell it at all. Suffice to say that the village was placed far off the beaten track even of foot-walking tourists, and its brooding inhabitants did not speak English on those rare occasions when they spoke at all.

There were sixty houses in the village, one-third of them straggling alongside the cattle-track which served as its main road, the rest climbing the heights behind and lurking half-hidden in a welter of pines, firs and mountain ash. All these abodes were of timber, highly ornamented, and would have been considered picturesque had they not oozed an elusive but easily sensed aura of overwhelming sadness.

Quiet, slow-moving folk lived in this forgotten hamlet, passing each other silently in the course of their daily tasks, fix-faced, fix-eyed, unemotional in the manner of those long emptied of human passions. Spiritual wells run dry forever. Shadow-people almost without substance.

I found this place by veritable accident. A plane crashed amid pines close behind the ruined castle of the Giant Ghormandel. Flung headlong into flexible pine which caught me, waved me to and fro before it dropped me into a bed of ferns, I was the sole survivor.

The plane crackled and spat and flared furiously a little lower down the hill. Adjacent tree trunks exploded like cannon under pressure of boiling sap and resin. Ferns withered, turned brown and paperlike, became flames. Rabbits scuttled in all directions, weasels with them. Birds whirred away squawking. Smoke poured cloud-high. Blackened bodies posed roasting in the fuselage, and the pilot—still in his cockpit—sat with bowed and steaming head. It was terrible.

To tell the truth, the scene sickened me far more than did the narrowness of my own escape. That sudden, unwanted cremation

amid the trees, with the castle ruins grinning like rotten teeth, and the dark, unfriendly green of the hills, the scowling skies all made a scene such as one carries for the remainder of one's life. It was a picture of death, red and rampant.

There was nothing I could do to help anyone, nothing at all. The plane's complement already was far beyond human assistance. Somewhat bruised and considerably shocked, but otherwise unharmed, I made my way down the hillside and found a tiny brook which I followed as it meandered through a thickly forested area that still sloped, though gradually. The atmosphere grew heavier, more morbid as I descended. By the time the village was near the air had become thick, oppressive and lay like a weight upon my mind. It created that unpleasant sensation of an impending headache that never manages to arrive.

A smell of wood-smoke came from the village although no chimney was visibly active. Not the pleasing, aromatic scent which greets one in wood-burning communities, but rather an acrid odour suggesting the combustion of rotting bark and dried fungi.

Four people saw me as I came by the end pair of houses. Two men, two women, all middle-aged. Their attire was well cared for in the matter of stitching and patching but the colours had long faded toward dark browns and greys. It was sartorial companionship for the colours of their souls, all browns and greys. The two men bore shepherds' crooks; the women carried brass-bound wooden buckets. All four looked at me with the subdued surprise of those who have not registered a true emotion for countless years.

As I came up to them, the elder man said swiftly to the others, speaking in a language I could understand, 'Something has gone wrong. Leave this to me.' He took a step toward me, lifting his brows inquiringly.

I told him about the plane, pointing to the castle of the Giant Ghormandel and the pale, thin wisp of smoke creeping upward behind it. My speech was swift, rather incoherent, and made with complete disregard of grammatical rules of a language which was not my own. Nevertheless, he got the gist of it. Events must have tried me more than I'd realized, for immediately it was evident that he understood, I felt weak in the pit of my stomach and sat in the cattle-track to beat myself to the fall. The world commenced whirling as he bent to support me, stooping over me like a mighty ghost.

Later, it could not have been much later, I found myself in bed staring at a row of copper pots lined upon the mantelshelf,

and a religious picture on the wall. The pots were dull but not dusty. The picture was faded, a little spotty. The window curtains had been darned but not dyed; they swayed in a slight draught, old and colourless. Even the wallpaper had been carefully stuck down where it tended to curl but was so aged that it should have been replaced years before. The general impression was not one of extreme poverty, but rather of tidiness which has been brought to its minimum in terms of bare necessity, a natural neatness which has been deprived of heart by causes unknown.

Presently the man to whom I had spoken came in. Let him be called Hansi because that was not his name. He came to my bed, blank-faced as a wooden image, and addressed me in tones devoid of vibrancy. It was like hearing the mechanical voice of an automaton.

'You are feeling better?'

I nodded. 'Yes, thank you.'

'That is good.' He hesitated, went on. 'Had you any friends or relations in that machine?'

'None.'

If he was surprised he did not show it. His eyes turned toward me, turned away. He thought awhile.

'We have sent a party to recover the bodies. The authorities will be notified as soon as possible.'

'You could telephone them,' I suggested.

'There is no telephone. There is no car. There is nothing.' He said it in a dull monotone.

'Then how do you—?'

'We walk. Did not the good God give us legs with which to walk? So we walk along eighteen miles of tracks and woodland trails and across two rope bridges to the nearest telephone. No vehicle can get here. The bodies will have to be carried out.' His eyes came back again. 'As you will have to be carried if you cannot walk.'

'I can walk,' I told him.

'Eighteen miles?' His eyebrows rose a little.

'Well . . . well—' I hesitated.

'It is a pity the hour is so late,' he continued, staring at the window as if it framed something pertaining to his remark. 'Night comes upon us very soon. If you had been here earlier we might have got you away before the fall of darkness. But now'—he shook his head slowly—'it is impossible. You must stay—one night.' He repeated it, making it significant. 'One night.'

'I don't mind,' I assured.

'We do!'

I sat up, putting my legs out of bed and pressing my feet on the floor to feel the firmness of it. 'Why?'

'There are reasons,' he evaded. Going to the window, he peered out. Then he closed the window, doing it with considerable care, making sure that it latched tightly and that the latch was firmly home. Finally he fastened the latch with a strong padlock. It was now impossible to open the casement, while its panes were far too small to permit escape after the glass had been removed. Patting the pocket in which he had put the key, he remarked, 'That is that!'

After watching this performance I had a deep and frightening sense of imprisonment. It must have shown in my features, but he chose to ignore it.

Facing me, he asked, 'Do you like music?'

'Some,' I admitted.

His lips thinned, drew back to expose white teeth, and he said with a sudden and surprising venom that shocked me, 'I hate music! We all hate music!'

This contrast with his previous impassiveness lent a terrible emphasis to his words. It was an uncontrolled burst of passion from a source I'd mistakenly thought dried up. It had all the elements of the unexpected, unnerving the listener as if he had heard and seen a marble statue part its lips and curse loudly.

'I hate music! We all hate music!'

Without saying more, he went away.

Some ten or fifteen minutes afterward I decided that boredom served only to enhance hunger. The recent disaster still affected me, the thick, cloying atmosphere weighed heavily upon me. I needed something to eat and I yearned for company other than that of my own thoughts. Putting on shoes, I pulled open the only door and left the room.

Going slowly down an ornate but unpolished wooden staircase, I reached a small hall. A dull fire glowed at one end, gave off the acrid smell noticed earlier. Nearby, a crudely wrought table was covered with a grey cloth. The walls were panelled, without picture or ornament of any kind. A book case full of dusty, seldom-used tomes stood at one side.

There had been time only to survey all this when a woman appeared through an archway at the other end. She was forty or thereabouts, tall, slender and as sad-faced as any yet seen. Though her features remained set, a most peculiar expression lurked within

her eyes as she looked at me, a sort of hunger, an intense yearning tempered and held in check by horror.

All she said was, 'You wish for food?' and her eyes tried to draw me to her while, at the same time, thrusting me away.

'Yes, lady,' I admitted, watching her and wondering what lay behind that peculiar gaze. Her desire for me was in no way embarrassing. Indeed, I felt within me that it was clean, decent, but pitiful because of its thwarting.

Without another word she turned, went into the kitchen beyond the arch, came back with black bread, heather-honey and fresh milk. I sat at the table and enjoyed my meal as best I could despite that she spent the whole time standing near the fire and eating me with her eyes. She did not speak again until I had finished.

'If you go outside you must be back before dark, well before dark.'

'All right, lady.' Anything to please her. Inwardly, I could conceive no prospect more dismal than that of wandering around this village after dark. It was dispiriting enough in broad daylight.

For some time, I don't know how long since I did not possess a watch, I explored the hamlet, studied its houses, its people. The longer I looked at them the more depressed I felt. Their abodes were strangely devoid of joy. The folk were quite uncommunicative without being openly unsociable. None spoke to me, though several women looked with the same hungry horror displayed by the one in Hansi's house. It was almost as if they desired something long forbidden and triply accursed, something of which I was the living witness, therefore to be both wanted and feared.

My own uneasiness grew toward twilight. It was the accumulative effect of all this unnaturalness plus the gradual realization that the village was lacking in certain respects. It had vacuums other than spiritual ones. Certain features normal to village life were missing; I could *feel* them missing without being able to decide what they were.

Not until dusk began to spread and I reached the door of Hansi's house did it come to my mind that no truly domestic animals had been visible. The place was devoid of them. I had seen a small herd of cattle and a few mountain goats, but not one cat, not one dog.

A moment later it struck me with awful force that neither had I seen a child. That was what was wrong—not a child!

Indoors, the tall woman gave me supper, early though the hour. As before, she hung around pathetically wanting and not-wanting.

Once she patted my shoulder as if to say, 'There! There!' then hurriedly whipped her hand away. My mind concocted a scarey notion of her quandary; that to give comfort was to pass sentence of death. It frightened me. How foolish it is to frighten oneself.

Soon after total darkness Hansi came in, glanced at me, asked the woman, 'Are the casements fastened? All of them?'

'Yes, I have seen to them myself.'

It did not satisfy him. Methodically he went around trying the lot, upstairs and downstairs. The woman seemed to approve rather than resent this implied slur upon her capabilites. After testing each and every latch and lock Hansi departed without another word.

Selecting a couple of books from the case, I bore them up to my room, closed the door, examined the window. The latch had been so shaped as to fit into a hasp, and the padlock linking the two was far beyond my strength to force open. So far as could be told, all other windows were secured in similar manner.

The place was a prison. Or perhaps a madhouse. Did they secretly consider me insane? Could it be that they had not actually gone to the wrecked plane because they thought my story a lunatic's fancy? Or, conversely, were they themselves not of sound mind? Had fate plunged me into some sort of national reservation for people who were unbalanced? If so, when—and how—was I going to escape?

Beyond my window ran a footpath edging the gloomy firs and pines that mounted to the top of a hill. The woods were thick, the path narrow and shadowy, but a rising moon gradually illuminated the lot until one could see clearly. It was there, right outside my window, that I saw what will remain in my worst dreams forever.

The books had amused me for three hours with a compost of outlandish stories and simply expressed folk tales of such a style that evidently they were intended for juveniles. Tiring, I turned down the oil-lamp, had a last look out of the window before going to bed.

The two men were strolling along the path, one bearing a thick cudgel held ready on his shoulder, the other carrying a gun. Opposite my window they paused, looked into the trees. Their attitudes suggested expectancy, wariness and stubborn challenge. Nothing happened.

Continuing their patrol, they went three or four paces, stopped. One of them felt in his pocket, bent down and appeared to be

fumbling around the region of his own boots. I had my cheek close against the cold glass as I strove to see what he was doing. A moment later I discovered that he was feeding a small rat which was sitting on its haunches and taking his offerings in paws shaped like tiny hands.

They walked on. The rat followed, gambolling behind them, its eyes gleaming fitfully in the moonlight and resembling little red beads. Just as the two men passed out of my sight several more rats emerged from the undergrowth and ran eagerly in the same direction.

Sneaking out of the door, I crossed a passage, entered the front room which was furnished but unoccupied. This room's windows overlooked the cattle-track which formed the main stem. In due time the two men returned to view, complete with cudgel and gun. They had the wary bearing of an armed patrol performing a regular and essential duty. Eight rats, all small and crimson-eyed, followed very close upon their heels.

As they neared my vantage point a woman came out of the house right opposite, seated herself on its step and tossed titbits from a large bag on her lap. Rats swarmed around her, scuttling grey shapes that came from the shadows and darker places.

I could not hear their excited squeaking; the casement was too close-fitting for that. The woman reached out her hand and petted one or two and they responded by fawning upon her. If only the light had been stronger I am sure it would have revealed her formerly pale, wan face now glowing with love . . . love for the rats.

Daytime surliness, secret fear, a mixed desire and revulsion for the lonely stranger, night-time affection for rats—what did all these things mean? It was too much for me. I had nothing in common with isolated mountain folk such as these. Tomorrow, at all costs, I must get away.

By this time the patrolling men had passed on and the woman was alone with her rodents. Returning to my own room, I had another look at the path, saw nothing other than a solitary rat which ran across as if anxious to join its fellows in the village. The moon was a little higher, its light a little stronger. Dark conifers posed file on file, a silent army awaiting the order to descend the hill.

I went to bed, lay there full of puzzled, apprehensive thoughts, and—let me confess it—nervous, uneasy, too restless to sleep. As the night-hours crawled tediously on and the moonbeams

strengthened, the air grew lighter, colder, less oppressive, more invigorating.

This peculiarity of the atmosphere waxed so greatly that it created a strange tenseness within me, an inexplicable feeling of expecting something grave and imminent. So powerful did this sensation become that eventually I found myself sitting up in bed, cold and jumpy, ears straining for they knew not what, eyes upon the brilliant window which at any moment might frame a face like none seen before in this or any other world.

That such pointless but wideawake anxiety was silly, I knew full well, yet I could not help it, could not control it. I strove to divert my mind by wondering whether that woman was still bestowing love upon her rats, and by listening for the passing footsteps of the patrol.

Then, as my eyes remained fixed upon the casement, something came through as easily as did the moonbeams. One moment there was the utter silence of a waiting world; the next, it was through the window and in the room with me.

It was nothing that I could see. It could only be heard and then not with the ears. Insidiously it penetrated the locked timber frame and tight panes of the casement, pierced the very walls of the house, passed through the bones of my skull and registered deep within my mind. A thin, reedy fluting which sounded sweet and low.

So soft and surreptitious was the sound that at first I mistook it for a figment of the imagination; but as I sat and stared at the window the music persisted and gradually swelled as if its source were creeping nearer, nearer.

Presently it was quite loud though still within my mind and completely unbearable with my ears. It waxed and waned, joyful and plaintive by turns, sobbing down the scale and chuckling up it, weeping a little and laughing a lot. An outlandish theme ran through its trills and flourishes as a cord runs through a string of pearls. There was a weird rhythm beating steadily within the tones and half-tones, a haunting off-beat, fascinating, mind-trapping—and beckoning, continually beckoning.

Somehow I knew that it was for my mind alone, that others in the village could not hear what I could hear. It went on and on, calling me, summoning me, and its spasms of laughter drove away all fear until I wanted to laugh with it, carefree and joyously. So powerful was its attraction that it drew me from bed, toward the window where I stood and stared into the moon-

light. There was nothing voluntary about that action. My bemused mind obeyed the urge without previous thought; my legs responded to my mind and bore me to the window. I got there with no remembrance of the going. I merely arrived.

The pines and firs still stood in close array. The path was clearly lit and completely empty. Not a soul was to be seen, yet the eerie music continued without let or pause and the whole world seemed to be waiting, waiting for some unguessable culmination.

My face was pressed close against the glass, almost trying to push through it and get me nearer, if only an inch nearer, to that glorified flood of notes. The lilt chimed and tinkled like fairy bells within my brain, and as it repeated again and again its quality of attraction grew progressively stronger. It was a case of familiarity breeding desire where, had I only known the truth, there would have been unutterable horror and a mighty fear.

At moments the tonal sequences suggested speech though I could hear no actual words. But words came with them into my mind from I knew not where, insinuated with wondrous cunning beyond my capacity to understand. It was as if certain ecstatic chords conjured parallel phrases, creating a dreadful dream-poetry which percolated through the night.

Oh come and tread the lazy leaves
And dance through scented heather,
Play hide and seek amid the sheaves,
Or vault the hills together.
Cast care away before the dawn;
With me for everlasting
Run free while mothers sit and mourn,
A little rat . . .

I lost the run of words just then because a brief glimpse of colour showed between the standing trees while the music grew enormously both in volume and enticement. My whole attention remained riveted upon the trees until shortly a being stepped forth and posed full in the light of the moon.

Tall and terribly thin, he wore a bi-coloured jerkin of lurid yellow and red with a peaked and feathered cap to match. Even his up-pointed slippers were coloured, one yellow, one red. A slender flute was in his hands, one end to his mobile lips, the other aimed straight at my window. His long, supple fingers moved with marvellous dexterity as he subjected me to a musical stream of irresistible invitation.

His face! I looked upon it and did not cease to look upon it all the time I tore at the casement's latch, heaved upon its chain,

struggled desperately to burst the lock asunder. I wanted to get out, how madly, insanely I wanted to get out, to run free beneath the moon, to dance and prance, to mope and mow, to gabble and gesticulate and vault the hills while mothers mourned.

Unknown to me, my own voice alternately moaned my mortification and shouted my rage at being thwarted while I lugged and tugged in crazy endeavour to tear the window wide open. My ears were incapable of hearing my own noises, or any others for that matter. I was concentrating tremendously and exclusively upon that magnetic tune coming from outside and the moonlit visage of him who was producing it. A pane of glass broke into a hundred shards and blood flowed on my hand, yet I saw nothing but the face, heard nothing but its song.

It was an idiot face with enormous laughing eyes. A drooling, drooping, loose-hung, imbecilic countenance in which the optics shone with clownish merriment. It was the face of my friend, my brother, my mother, my boon companion, my comrade of the night, my only joyful ally in this sullen hostile world. The face of him without whom I would be utterly alone, in ghastly solitude, for ever and ever, to the very end of time. I wanted him. Heavens, how hungrily I wanted him! Beating at the window, I screamed my desperate need for him.

There were feet moving below somewhere within the house, and heavy feet coming upstairs, hurriedly, responding to a sudden urgency. If my ears heard them they did not tell me. I stood in the full, cold glare of moonlight and hammered futilely at my prison bars and drank in that idiot face still uttering its piping call to come away and play.

Just as someone pushed open my bedroom door the flute-player made one swift and graceful step backward into the trees. At the same moment there came from the side of the house to my left a tremendous crash like that of an ancient and overloaded blunderbuss. Leaves, twigs and bits of branches sprang away from the trees and showered over the yellow-red figure.

The music ceased at once. To me its ending was as awful as the loss of the sun, leaving a world swamped in darkness. Verily a light-o'-laughter had become extinguished and there was nothing around me but the grey-brown souls of the immeasurably sad.

I clawed and scrabbled at the casement in futile effort to bring back the magic notes, but while the torn leaves still were drifting the fluter receded farther into the shadows and was gone. Once, twice there was a gleam of colour, yellow and red, in the tree gaps

highter up the hill. After that, no other sign. He had escaped to a haunt unknown; he had gone with his calling pipe and his sloppy face and his great grinning eyes.

Hansi came behind me, snatched me away from the window, threw me on the bed. His big chest was heaving but his features were as though set in stone. Having reached its extreme my emotional pendulum was now on its back-swing, a revulsion was making itself felt. I offered no resistance to Hansi, made no protest, but lay on the bed and watched him while my mind incubated a terrible fear born of the narrowness of my escape.

Moving a heavy, wheel-back chair near to the window, Hansi sat himself in it, showed clearly that he was there for the remainder of the night. He did not say a word. His bearing was that of one whose only weapon against powers of darkness is an uncompromising stubbornness.

Increasing coldness persuaded me to pull the bedcovers over myself. I lay flat on my back, perspiring freely and shivering at the same time, and vaguely sensing the stickiness of partially congealed blood on one hand. Sounds from outside came clearly through the broken pane; a dull snapping of trodden twigs, stamping of boots, mutter of voices as hunters sought in vain for the body of the hunted.

Soon I went to sleep, exhausted with a surfeit of nervous strain. Dreams came to me, some muddled and inconsequential, one topical and horribly vivid. In that one I was blissfully running at the heels of a prancing imbecile, drinking in his never-ending song and following him through dell and thicket, across moonlit glades and streams, climbing higher always higher until we reached Ghormandel's shattered walls. And there he turned and looked at me, still piping. I was small, very small—and had a thin, hairless tail.

They rushed me away with the morning. I had breakfast in a hurry, set off with Hansi and a solemn, lantern-jawed man named Klaus. A few women stood at their doorways and watched me go, their eyes yearning and spurning precisely as they had done before. I felt that they regretted my departure and yet were glad, immensely glad. One waved to me and I waved back. No other responded. The sadness of the village deepened as we left, deepened to an awful sorrow too soul searing to forget.

One hour's march, fifteen minutes' rest; one hour's march, fifteen minutes' rest. At a steady pace of three miles an hour the trip was easy. By the fourth rest-period the giant's castle had

shrunk to no more than a faintly discernible excrescence upon a distant rise. I sat on a stone, watched the nearest trees and listened with my mind.

'Hansi, who was it that came in the night?'

'Forget him,' he advised curtly.

I persisted, 'Does he belong to the ruined castle?'

'In a way.' He got up, prepared to move on. 'Forget him—it is best.'

We continued on our way. I noticed that neither man eyed the trees as I eyed them, nor listened as I listened. They progressed in stolid silence, following the path, looking neither to the right nor left. It seemed to be accepted that by day they were free from that which was to be feared by night.

Mid-afternoon, footsore but not tired, we arrived at a small country town. It may have been sleepy and backward, but by my standards it was full of vivacity and sophistication. One could not help but contrast its bustling liveliness with the dreary, anaemic place from which I had come.

Hansi had a long talk with the police who made several telephone calls, gave me a meal, filled up forms which Hansi signed. They issued me with a train-ticket. Hansi accompanied me to the station. There, I used half an hour's wait to pester him again.

'Who was it? Tell me!'

He gave in reluctantly, speaking like one forced to discuss a highly distasteful subject. 'He is the son of his father and the son of his mother.'

'Of course,' I scoffed. 'What else could he be?'

Ignoring me, he went on, 'Long ago his mother used her evil arts to kill his father Ghormandel. From then on she ruled the roost by fire, bell, candle and incantation—until our reckless forefathers had had enough of her.' He paused a moment, stared dully at the sky. 'Whereupon they trapped her by trickery and burned her for the foul old witch she was.'

'Oh!' I felt a cold shiver on me.

'And then they hunted her son, her only child, who was half-wizard, half-witch, but he escaped. Hiding in a place afar, he developed his dark talents and bided his time for vengeance.'

'Go on,' I urged as he showed signs of leaving it at that.

'When he was ready, he tested his powers in a distant town. They worked perfectly. So he came back to us . . . and took away our children.'

'What?'

'He charmed them away,' said Hansi, grim and bitter. 'Every

one but those able only to crawl—and even those strove to squirm from us. From that day to this he has slunk around like a beast in the night, waiting, always waiting. Most of our women are afraid to have children. The few who dare have to send them to distant relatives until they reach adulthood or, alternatively, lock them in the *kinderhaus* between every dusk and dawn.' He glanced at me. 'Where I was locked for many years. Where you were locked last night.'

'Only at night?' I asked.

He nodded. 'There is no peril by day. Why, I do not know. But always he is ready by night, ready to take a child—and give us back another rat!'

'You mean . . . he changes them?'

'We cannot say for certain. We suspect it. We fear it.' His big hand clenched into a knotted fist. A vein stood out on his forehead. 'Children have gone, fix-eyed, with outreaching hands, like blind ones feeling their way—and rats have come back, tame, playful, wanting food and mother-love.' His voice deepened, became harsh. 'Some day we shall deal with him as our forefathers dealt with the witch who bore him. If the people of that distant town had killed him when he was in their hands—'

'What town?'

He said, briefly but devastatingly, 'Hamelin.'

Then the train came in.

At this date I often wonder whether the stones of the Giant Ghormandel's castle still rot upon that fateful hill; whether far beneath them lies that accursed village in which it is dangerous to be born. I wonder, too, whether that long, lean shape in red and yellow yet roams light-footed beneath the moon, laughing and gibbering and piping its terrible invitation.

So far, I have had no desire to return and see for myself. The elements of dread are stronger than curiosity despite that the passage of years has made it safe for me to go. It was anything but safe when I was there. Then, I had needed the watchful protection of the sad ones at a mere nine years of age.

Me and My Shadow

LITTLE Trimble lowered a shaking spoon, blinked his weak, apologetic eyes.

'Now, now, Martha! Don't be like that!' he quavered.

Resting a beefy arm athwart her end of the breakfast table, Martha spoke slowly and viciously. Her voice was harsh with emotion, her features red with wrath, her expression venomous.

'For fifteen years I've lectured you, instructed you, commanded you. For seven hundred and eighty weeks of seven days each I've tried to do my duty as a wife by knocking some spark of manhood into your miserable body.' She slammed a huge, horny hand upon the table, made the milk jump in its jug. 'And what've I got?'

'Aw, Martha!'

'What I've got,' she bellowed, 'is exactly what I had right at the start—a crawling, quivering, undersized, cowardly, spineless and gutless little worm!'

'I ain't as bad as that,' he protested feebly.

'Prove it!' she shouted. 'Prove it! Go and do what you haven't found the nerve to do in fifteen shivering years. Go and tell that boss of yours you've got to have a raise.'

'Tell him?' Trimble blinked at her, aghast. 'You mean ask him?'

'I said to tell him.' Her voice was bitingly sarcastic, and still loud.

'He'll fire me.'

'Of course, you would think of that!' Down came the hand again. The milk went over the top with fixed bayonets, flopped, made a spatter in No Man's Land. 'Let him fire you. It'll be your chance. Tell him you've waited for it fifteen years, then hand him a poke in the gizzard. Find another job.'

'What if there ain't another job?' he asked, almost tearfully.

'There're plenty. Dozens of them.' She stood up, her mighty bulk still awing him despite years of familiarity. 'Unfortunately, they're for men!'

He flinched, reached for his hat.

'I'll see,' he murmured.

'You'll see! You were going to see a year back. And the year before that.'

Her voice followed him out the front door and a hundred yards down the street. 'And the year before that, and the one before that. Pfah!'

He mirrored himself in a window farther down. There he was, well under average height, paunchy, flabby, insignificant. Guess everybody was pretty well right about him. Just a fat little slob.

A downtown bus came along. He reached the door, got boosted in by a brawny hustler behind. The hustler rough-housed past him while he stood dumbly tendering the driver a quarter.

Trimble didn't say anything when a hard, heavy elbow dented the flabbiness over his ribs. He was used to it.

The driver slapped five nickels into his hand, scowled, shoved his machine into gear. Dropping a coin into the box, Trimble wandered to the back.

There was a vacant seat blocked by a blue-jowled individual. The sitter undressed Trimble with one contemptuous rip of his eyes, made no attempt to move.

Stretching himself, Trimble inserted pudgy fingers in a swinging handle, hung on without remark.

Dismounting ten blocks down, he crossed the road, his path including a deep safety curve around the backside of a policeman's horse. Trotting along the sidewalk, he reached the office.

Watson was already in. Trimble said, 'Good morning!' and Watson growled, 'Humph!' Every day their exchange was the same—good morning, and humph.

The others came in later. One replied to Trimble's greeting with what might have been, 'Marn!' or 'Garn!' The rest grunted, snorted, or grinned as if at a secret joke.

At ten, the boss made his advent. He never just turned up, or arrived, or landed. He always made an advent. This time was the same. The boss entered with the air of one about to lay a foundation-stone, or launch a battleship, or something. Nobody greeted him. They tried to look extremely respectful and very busy at one and the same time. Except Trimble, who managed to depict servile idleness.

He gave the boss an hour to get through the morning mail, then prayed for strength, knocked, went in.

'Excuse me, sir.'

'Hey?' The bison head came up, savage eyes transfixed the petitioner. 'Well, what d'you want?'

'Nothing, sir, nothing,' assured Trimble, his blood turning to water. 'It wasn't important, and I've forgotten it.'

'Then get out!'

Trimble got out. Twelve o'clock came, and he tried to steel himself once more. There seemed to be a shortage of steel. He sat down again wearily.

At ten minutes to one, he tried for the third time, stood outside the boss's door, lifted his knuckles, and then changed his mind. He'd leave it until after lunch. The food would fortify him.

There was a bar on the way to the cafeteria. He'd passed it a thousand times, but had never gone inside. This time, it struck him that a shot of whisky might help. He'd heard it called Dutch courage, and any sort of courage—Dutch or Zulu—was something he could do with aplenty.

Warily, his gaze went up and down the street. If Martha caught him in this sink of iniquity she'd fell him in his tracks. Yes, another Indian would bite the dust. But there wasn't any Martha. Greatly daring, he entered the bar.

The clients, or inmates, or whatever they're called, stared at him with open suspicion. Six of them were propped against the lengthy counter, their eyes summing him up as a barleywater addict. He'd have gone back if it hadn't been too late.

A bartender came along, said curtly, 'What's yours?'

'A drink.'

Somebody's snicker brought home to Trimble that one couldn't very well ask for a drink. One had to be more specific. For the life of him, he couldn't think of anything but beer. He didn't want beer.

'What's good?' he asked brightly.

'It depends.'

'Depends on what?'

'Whether you've got a thirst, a yen, or a woe!'

'I have,' said Trimble fervently, 'got a woe!'

'Leave it to me.' With an assured flick of his cloth, the bartender went away. He did things with bottles, came back, placed before the customer a glass of cloudy, yellow liquid. 'That'll be forty.'

Trimble paid, sat and stared at the glass. It fascinated him. It frightened him. It was as full of invitation and terror as an uncoiled cobra. He was still looking at it five minutes later when

his neighbour, a hefty six-footer, casually put out a hairy hand, took the glass, drained it at a gulp. On no one but Trimble could such a breach of saloon etiquette be perpetrated.

'Always glad to help a pal,' jeered the speaker's mouth, while his eyes said, 'Well, d'ya want to make anything out of it?'

Offering no retort, no protest, Trimble went out. The contempt on the bartender's face was a hurtful thing. The others' raucous laughter was a dancing flame that scorched his neck and ears.

Safely outside, he communed with himself. What was the matter with him that he should be at the receiving end of all the kicks and butts? Could he help it that he was not a rip-roaring tough? Wasn't it the way he was made? Most important of all, what could he do about it—if anything?

There were these something-analysts to whom one could appeal. But they were doctors of a sort. He was terrified of doctors with their background of hospitals and operations. Besides, he feared appealing to anyone lest his reward be ridicule. He'd had plenty of ridicule ever since he was a kid. Was there a thing he didn't fear —just one, single thing of which he wasn't scared?

Somebody spoke close by him.

'Now don't be frightened. Maybe I can help you.'

Turning, Trimble saw a little, white-haired man with a shrivelled form topped by a parchment face from which peered eyes of the clearest blue. The clothes this man wore were old-fashioned, curious, but his general appearance served to strengthen his expression of amiable understanding.

'I saw what happened in there.' The little man nodded toward the bar. 'I appreciate your position.'

'Why should it interest you?' asked Trimble, guardedly.

'I'm always interested in people.' His friendly hand took Trimble's arm and they walked along side by side. 'People are infinitely more interesting than things.' The blue eyes twinkled gently. 'It is an iron rule that everybody has one outstanding fault, or, if you prefer, one fundamental weakness. The commonest one is fear. The man who fears no man may yet fear cancer. The dictator fears hidden thoughts. Many people fear death, and those who don't, fear life.'

'True,' conceded Trimble, thawing in spite of himself.

'You are a slave of fear,' went on the ancient. 'Your case is made malignant by your own consciousness of it. You are too aware.'

'Don't I know it!'

'That's exactly what I'm telling you! You know it. And it is always with you. You cannot forget it.'

'I wish I could,' said Trimble. 'Maybe someday I shall. Maybe I'll get guts. Heavens knows I've tried!'

'I'm sure you have.' The wizened one smiled happily. 'All a trier needs is the support of an ever-present friend. He craves encouragement, and, if need be, assistance. Every man has a friend of his own.'

'Show me mine,' challenged Trimble lugubriously. 'I'm a hell of a pal to myself.'

'You shall have the support gained only by a favoured few,' promised the other.

He looked around very cautiously, then felt in the depths of a pocket.

'You shall quaff from a fountain in nethermost Tibet.'

He produced a long, thin vial filled with liquid of irridescent green.

'This,' he whispered, 'will give you ears to hear the voice of darkness, a tongue to talk in tones of a ghost.'

'It'll what?'

'Take it,' urged the other. 'I give it because it is the law of Shan that grace shall beget grace, and strength shall father strength.' Another gentle smile. 'You have now only one fear to conquer —the fear to drink!'

He was gone. How he went was a mystery to the astonished Trimble. First, the little man was there, the next instant his wraith-like form had merged with distant pedestrians. Trimble stood, stared up the street, then at the vial clenched in plump fingers. He put the thing in his pocket.

Ten minutes to spare outside the time required to get back to the office. Trimble exited from the cafeteria, his stomach only half filled, his soul troubled. The choice lay between a scene with the boss or a scene with Martha. He was between the devil and the deep sea and the fact had spoiled his appetite.

Detouring around the block, he found a vacant lot free from scurrying people. Seeking the comparative privacy of the space's farthest corner, he took out the shining vial, had another look at it.

The contents were brilliantly green and looked oily. The stuff might be a drug, or even poison. If a drug could make gangsters hold up banks, what could it make him do? Or, if it was a poison, would it make him die peacefully and without pain? Would

Martha weep when she saw him lying stiff and cold, a saintlike expression upon his waxen face?

Uncapping the vial, he put his nose to it, got a whiff of dreamy, elusive odours. He stuck in the tip of his tongue, licked it around his mouth, absorbing the flavour. Strong, aromatic, enticing. Putting the vial to his lips, he swigged the contents to the last drop. It was the first chance he had ever taken, the most reckless thing he had ever done.

'And about time, too!' commented an eerie voice.

Trimble looked around. There wasn't anybody near him. He threw away the empty vial, decided he'd been deluded.

'Down here,' hinted the voice.

'Uhn?' Trimble stared in a circle. Nobody! Gosh, that must have been a potent brew—he was imagining things already.

'Down here,' urged the voice with sudden impatience. 'On the floor, you barrel-shaped lump of stupidity!' A pause, then complainingly: 'I'm your shadow.'

'Oh, suffering snakes!' mouthed Trimble, covering his face with quivering hands. 'I'm talking to my shadow! I've got the rats on one drink!'

'Don't be such a damned dope!' reproved the shadow. 'Every man's got his black ghost, but not every guy can use or understand shady language.' Silence, while the shade pondered, then the blunt command: 'Come on—we're going places.'

'Where?'

'We're going to beat up that bum in the bar.'

'What?' yelled Trimble, at the top of his voice. A couple of pedestrians stopped dead on the sidewalk, gaped across the lot. Trimble took no notice. His mind was a whirl of wild confusion, his whole being tormented by fear of the strait-jacket and the padded cell.

'Don't be so all-fired noisy.'

The ghost faded slightly as a cloud crossed the sun, then came back at full strength. 'Now that we can pow-wow, I reckon I'd better have a name. You can call me Clarence.'

'Cl . . . Cl . . . Cl . . . .'

'Sure! Anything wrong with it?' demanded the other aggressively. 'Shut up! Get over here, nearer the wall—that's right! See me sitting up? See me big—bigger'n you? Now bend that right arm. Okay, take a look at mine. A humdinger, huh? What wouldn't Dempsey give for a limb like this!'

'God!' groaned Trimble pitifully, his arm bent, his eyes turned appealingly to the sky.

'You'n me,' went on Clarence, 'can now co-operate. You do the aiming, and I'll hand the wallops. You've got to make sure you get the right side of the light to make me big and strong, then we'll lash out together. Just take good aim, remembering that I'm with you. Every time you hand a guy a prod, I'll paste him one that'll hang him on a ledge twelve floors up. D'you understand?'

'Y-yes,' admitted Trimble, his voice almost inaudible. He cast a leery glance at his rear, saw that the number of onlookers had increased to ten.

'Turn around so's I'll be behind you,' ordered the shadow. 'Take a swipe by yourself, then another one with me. You'll be surprised at the difference.'

Obediently, Trimble turned, faced the grinning audience, plunged his pudgy fist into thin air. It was a futile effort, and he knew it. Drawing back, he swung again, using all his strength and weight. His arm shot out like a piston, dragging his body off balance. He stumbled forward. The spectators laughed.

'See? What did I tell you? Not one guy in ten knows his own strength.' Clarence permitted himself a ghostly chuckle. 'Now we're all set. How about laying those kibitzers in a row, just to get our hand in?'

'No!' shouted Trimble. He wiped perspiration from a crimson half-crazed face. The audience went up to fifteen.

'Okay, have it your own way. Now let's get back to the bar, and remember I'm always with you!'

With his feet dragging more and more reluctantly, Trimble reached the bar. He stood outside, knees knocking, while his bellicose shade gave quick instructions.

'Nobody can hear me but you. You're one of the favoured few who can hear and speak the language of the dark. We'll go in there together, and you'll do what I tell you to do, say what I tell you to say. Whatever happens, don't get scared—I'll be with you, and I could flop a bull elephant.'

'You b-bet,' agreed Trimble with total lack of enthusiasm.

'All right. What in hell are you waiting for?'

Like a condemned criminal pacing the thirteen fateful steps, Trimble moved through the doors and into the bar. The same gang was still there, the same beefy hijacker lounging at the nearer end.

The bartender took one look at the entrant, smirked, then jerked an informative thumb. The hijacker sat pat and scowled. Still smirking, the bartender came up.

'What can I do for you?'

'Switch on the lights,' gasped Trimble in an unearthly voice, 'and I'll show you something.'

Now he'd done it! He'd committed himself beyond withdrawal. He'd have to go through with the whole whacky affair right until the interns came and bore him away.

The bartender considered. Whatever was going to be shown, it could be twisted into something that would add to the day's fun. He decided to oblige.

'Sure!' he said, and switched them on.

Trimble looked around, absorbed a sudden dose of confidence. It was the sight at his side. There was Clarence towering up the wall like a mighty djinn.

'Go on,' commanded the tremendous shadow. 'Do your stuff!'

Taking one step forward, Trimble snatched up the hijacker's glass, flung its contents into the fellow's face.

The recipient arose like one in a dream, gasped, mopped his streaming features, gasped again. Then he removed his jacket, folded it carefully, placed it on the counter. He spoke to his opponent very slowly, very deliberately, and very politely.

'I ain't rolling in money, but my heart is bursting with charity. I'll see that you get a decent burial!' With that, he released a pile-driver.

'Duck!' yelped Clarence.

Trimble pulled his head into his boots, felt an express locomotive rush across his hair.

'Now!' screamed Clarence frantically.

Popping up, Trimble slammed out a fist, concentrating on his aim, but putting all his weight and strength behind the blow. He tried for the Adam's apple, got it, and for a moment thought he was going to stick his arm through the bum's neck. It was something like walloping the sixtieth floor of the Empire State, and the effect was just as spectacular. The fellow went down like a poled ox. Oh boy, had he got power!

'Again!' raved Clarence, 'Lemme soak him another as he gets up.'

The smitten one was struggling to rise, an expression of absolute incredulity upon his face. He got halfway, making uncertain motions with his arms and legs.

Trimble wound up his right arm until he could almost hear it

whiz. Then he let his fist fly, this time trying for the other's smeller. He got it with a loud swack like the sound of a skied baseball. The victim tried to throw his head clean off his shoulders, then collapsed and slid a foot along the floor.

'G-g-gosh!' stuttered an awed voice.

Shaking with excitement, Trimble turned his back on his supine opponent, went to the counter. The bartender came up, his features wearing an expression of deep respect. Trimble licked his own forefinger, drew a spit face inside a beer-ring on the counter.

'Put curls on that!'

The bartender hesitated, looked around with beseeching air, swallowed hard. Meekly, he licked his finger, added the curls.

Reaching over, Trimble snatched the fellow's cloth.

'This is what'll happen next time you pull faces at me.' He rubbed out the face.

'Now, Mister, don't get tough,' pleaded the bartender.

'Nuts!' It was the first time Trimble had used the word as a retort. He shied the cloth back, had a look at his snoring victim, walked out.

As his plump little form passed through the doors, a customer said, 'That guy sure is dynamite! Looks to me like he's full of dope, and ripe for a killing.'

'I dunno.' The bartender was both subdued and sheepish. 'You can't never tell from the looks of them. Take Slugs McKeefe, he's a world-beater at his weight, but he's only a fat little guy. I didn't like that feller's looks from the first—he might be Slug's brother.'

'He might,' conceded the critic thoughtfully.

Down on the floor, the stricken one's bubbling snore ended in a gasp, a gulp, and an oath. He stirred, tried to sit up.

'Now for the boss,' said Clarence, delight in his voice.

'No, no, not that!' Trimble's apologetic face was crimson from the strain of his recent adventure. His eyes kept flickering back, searching for the murderous pursuit that he thought was inevitable. It was hard to believe that he'd actually done what he had done, and he couldn't understand how he'd escaped alive.

'I said now for the boss, you animated pumpkin!' repeated the shadow, with much asperity.

'But I daren't batter the boss.' Trimble's voice grew to a loud, protesting wail. 'It'll get me in stir.'

'What'll get you in stir?' demanded a passer-by, stopping and staring at the distracted speaker.

'Nothing—I was talking to myself.' Trimble stopped as his

irritated shadow snarled an interruption. He was reluctant to take the offered advice, but it looked as if he had to. 'Hey!' he called. His questioner came back.

'Mind your own damn business,' said Trimble, rudely.

'Okay, okay, keep your hair on!' The other was startled, hurried away.

'See?' chortled Clarence. 'Now for the boss. We won't get hard unless we hafta.'

'Have to,' corrected Trimble.

'Hafta,' Clarence persisted. 'We'll talk first. If he won't appease us, we'll resort to force.' He was quiet for a moment, then added: 'And don't forget the lights—I like to grow powerful before I slap 'em.'

'Oh, all right.' Trimble began to feel resigned to a course of events that eventually was going to dump him in a cell, if not in the morgue. With a sigh of martyrdom, he entered the building, went upstairs to the office.

'Afternoon!'

'Humph!' said Watson.

Switching on the office lights, Trimble looked around, located his shady partner, then walked up close to Watson, and spoke in a very loud voice.

'I don't expect anything from a pig but a grunt. Might I remind you that I bade you good afternoon?'

'Eh? . . . ah! . . . huh?' Watson was both scared and thunderstruck. 'Ah! . . . very well. . . good afternoon!'

'That's right! Remember it in future.' With numb feet and a whirling brain, Trimble went across to the boss's door. He raised his knuckles to knock.

'Don't!' swore Clarence.

Trimble shuddered, grasped the door-knob, turned it gently. Taking a deep breath, he gave the door a tremendous thrust that sent it back with a crash. The thing almost flew off its hinges. As the boss shot up from behind his desk, Trimble walked in.

'You,' roared the boss, vibrating with rage, 'you're fired!'

Turning, Trimble went back, closing the maltreated door behind him. He didn't say a word.

'Trimble,' bellowed the boss, his voice reverberating behind the door, 'come here.'

Trimble entered for the second time. Closing the door on extended ears in the outer office, he scowled at the boss, then went to the wall, switched on the lights. After that, he fooled around

until he got a position that made Clarence ceiling-high. The boss squatted and watched all this, his face purple, his eyes popping.

They stared at each other awhile, their silence broken only by the boss's heavy, asthmatic breathing. Finally, the latter spoke.

'Have you been drinking, Trimble?'

'My taste in liquid refreshment is not a matter for discussion,' said Trimble, flatly. 'I came in to tell you that I've resigned.'

Stark horror filled his soul as the fateful words fell from his lips. He'd done it now! Which was worse, Clarence or Martha? He didn't know—but he sure had burned his boats.

'Resigned?' parroted the boss, mouthing it as if it was some new, outlandish word.

'Sure! I'm fed up. I'm going to offer my services to Rubinstein and Flanagan.' The boss shied like a frightened horse, and he went desperately on: 'They'll pay me well for what I know. I'm sick and tired of my lousy salary.'

'Now Trimble,' said the boss, gasping for breath, 'I've no desire to part with you after your many years of service. I would not like to see your undoubted talents wasted on a gang of pikers like Rubinstein and Flanagan. I'll give you another two dollars a week.'

'Lemme wipe his face off his neck,' suggested Clarence, eagerly.

'No!' shouted Trimble.

'Three dollars,' said the boss.

'Come on—just one crack,' Clarence persisted.

'No!' yelled Trimble, sweating at every pore.

'All right, I'll give you five.' The boss's face contorted. 'And that's final.'

Mopping his brow, Trimble felt as if he was nearing the end of an hour upon the rack. Perspiration trickled down his spine, and his legs felt weak.

'I've been grossly underpaid the last ten years, and I wouldn't stay with you for a raise of less than twelve bucks. I'm worth an extra twenty to you, but I'm willing to take twelve, and let you have eight for cigars.'

'C-c-cigars.'

'Rubinstein and Flanagan'll raise me twelve. You can do it—or do without.'

'Twelve!' The boss was dumbfounded, then annoyed, then thoughtful. Eventually, he reached a decision.

'It seems, Trimble, that I have been guilty of under-estimating

your abilities. I'll give you the increase for which you ask'—he bent forward and glared—'in exchange for a fidelity bond.'

'Okay. I'll stay.' Making for the door, he opened it, said, 'Thanks!'

'See?' said Clarence.

Without answering his nagging shade, Trimble took his seat at his desk.

In tones audible all over the room, he spoke to Watson.

'Nice weather we're having.'

'Humph!'

'Eh?' Trimble bawled.

'Very nice,' replied Watson, meekly.

His heart sang like a nest of nightingales while he worked through the afternoon. Somehow, the story of his affair with the boss leaked around the office. People spoke to him in manner different from that of yore. It was almost incredible, but he was getting something he'd never had before—respect.

Rain was hammering down when he closed his books and left for home. What did it matter? The stinging drops felt good on his plump, beaming face, and the air was like old wine. Disdaining the bus, he walked along the wet, shining avenue, whistling to himself as he trotted along. He'd got news that would paralyze Martha!

A noise came from around the next corner, an explosive sound like that of a burst tyre. Then another and another and another. Running feet pounded somewhere around the angle of the corner building. He came level, saw two figures racing toward him. One was six jumps behind the other, and both had guns. The nearest of the sprinting pair was twenty yards away. It was his opponent in the bar!

Spears of fear jabbed themselves into Trimble's brain. There was an uproar further down that street, and it looked like the running pair were making a frantic getaway. If the leader recognized Trimble, he'd seize the chance to blot him out in full flight. There was nowhere to hide in those split-seconds, no place in which to bury himself until the danger had passed. Even worse, the sky was heavily clouded, and his precious shadow was gone.

'Clarence!' he screamed, fearfully.

No reply. His shout drew the leading fugitive's attention. The fellow knew him immediately, sucked back thin lips in a deathly grin, raised his weapon. He was almost upon his quaking victim, the range was less than one yard, and it was impossible to miss.

Trimble kicked him on the knee-cap.

He didn't do it on the impulse of the moment, nor with the desperation of a cornered rat. He was driven to it by the inevitable conclusion that his only hope lay in behaving exactly as if his missing shadow was still in support. So he lashed out with his foot, striving to connect accurately, using every ounce of his strength.

The other promptly plunged onto his face as if determined to poke his head through the sidewalk and have a look at the subway. It was a heartening sight that made Trimble suspect his efficient shade might still be hanging around even though unseen. The thought lent him courage.

With the startled expression of one who has seen an ant miraculously change into a lion, the second runner pulled up almost chest to chest with Trimble. He was a tall, lanky specimen whose Adam's apple seemed beyond reach.

Trimble batted his stomach against his spine. The fellow gagged, bent his upper half to a convenient angle, and Trimble bashed the apple. The victim did not assume the expected horizontal position. His sallow features suffused with a mixture of hatred and agony, he straightened, swiped at Trimble with the barrel of his weapon.

The blow failed to connect. Following former practice, Trimble sucked his head into his shoulders, blew it up again, stabbed another one into the stomach. The face came down once more and he smacked it up with considerable vim.

A crash sounded behind him, and a red-hot wasp bit off the lobe of his left ear. He took no notice, and he concentrated upon the face to the complete exclusion of everything else. Foul oaths were pouring from somewhere near the source of the crash, heavy feet were thumping the sidewalk toward him, people were shouting and whooping all around.

He heard none of it. His mind had no knowledge of his first assailant's resurrection. That snarling pan opposite his own was his sole object in life, the one purpose of his being.

With aim and weight and strength, he bashed the face up, socked it down, clouted it backward. Something hard and knobbly exploded out of nothingness, seemed to tear the left cheekbone from his own head. Another one appeared to tear his ribs apart. But Trimble kept working on that face, battering it into a bloody mask and pounding in the gore.

His heart was a jitterbug, and his breath was coming in whistling

sobs when a long, black object sailed over the hateful face, descended, pushing it down to the floor. He made a couple more automatic swiping motions, then stood shuddering and blinking. His vision cleared slowly.

The cop said, 'Mister, for a feller your size you sure are sudden death!'

Looking around, Trimble saw that half a dozen cops had arrived, and were bundling up his recent opponents.

'That first guy,' went on the other, 'was Ham Carlotti, and we've wanted him for months.' He clothed Trimble in admiration. 'We owe you one for this. Any time we can do something for you, just ask.'

Getting out a handkerchief, Trimble dabbed his ear, looked at the handkerchief. There was blood on it. God, he was bleeding like a stuck pig! And his left eye was swelling up, his cheekbone felt like hell, his ribs were a torment. He was in a devil of a mess!

'You can do something for me right now,' he told the cop. 'Ever since I was a kid I've wanted to ride home in a police car. How about it?'

'You bet!' the cop enthused. 'It'll be a pleasure.' He called to the driver of a car that had just swung in. 'This gent's been a help. The ride's on us.'

'Whered'ya live?'

Clambering in, Trimble sat back and enjoyed himself. Off they went, hell-for-leather, the siren yelling like a banshee, traffic scuttling madly from their path. This was the life!

The sun came out, beaming at full strength. He became aware of his shadow riding by his side.

'Clarence.'

'Yes, Master,' he said very humbly.

'In future, you can leave it to me.'

'Yes, Master. But—'

'Shut up!' bawled Trimble.

'Shut up who?' inquired the driver, glancing surprisedly over his shoulder.

'The missus,' Trimble answered glibly. 'I'm ready for war.'

Smiling broadly, the driver whirled his car into the curb, followed his passenger to the door. When Martha opened it, he touched his cap, said: 'Ma'am, your husband's a hero.' Then he went.

'Hero!' snorted Martha. Crossing brawny arms on her ample bosom, she braced herself for an imformative speech. Then

her eyes found her partner's war-scarred face. She let the eyes protrude. 'Where've you been to get a mug like that?'

Vouchsafing no reply, Trimble pushed past her, went into the hall. He waited until she had closed the door, then put skinned knuckles on his hips, faced her squarely. He had a kindly nature, and he had no desire to hurt her unduly, but it was now necessary to impress this woman that she had to deal with a man.

'Martha, I've slapped down a couple of gangsters, and I've soaked the boss another twelve bucks.' He blinked as she clutched at the wall for support. 'I've been very patient with you for many years, but I've reached the end of my tether, and from now on I want no more of your lip.'

'Lip,' she echoed dazedly, not believing her ears.

'Otherwise, I'll paste you one that'll make you wish you'd brought your parachute.'

'Horatio!' She staggered forward, her face a picture of utter stupefaction. 'You wouldn't strike a woman, would you?'

'Wouldn't I!' He spat on his sore knuckles.

'Oh, Horatio!' In one wild swoop she had embraced his neck and found his protesting lips.

Heck, aren't women peculiar critters? They liked 'em gentle, but a few—like Martha—preferred 'em tough. Might as well give her more of the same.

Grabbing her hair, he pulled her face over to a comfortable slant. Then he kissed her. He concentrated on aim, weight, and strength. It was a pouting, juicy, emphatic osculation that finished in a loud report.

Grinning triumphantly, he peeked over her shoulder to see what his subdued shadow thought of that. But Clarence was too busy to bother. Didn't Martha have a shadow too?

Bitter End

THE ship dropped out of the sky with little noise other than that of its last braking blasts. Nor was it visibly spectacular because it came in the glare of the sun. Describing a shallow angle it neared the surface, let go a dozen bangs from its nose, hit sand with its belly and slid to a stop.

An expert eye could have seen at a glance that it was no ordinary moon-rocket such as flamed between Earth and satellite five times a week. It was longer, thinner, racier. Close inspection would have revealed it more worn, battered and neglected than any moon-rocket was permitted to be.

Originally it had been golden but now most of the plating was scraped away in fine, longitudinal stripes. Tiny missiles of great hardness and incredible velocity had scored the armour from end to end. In seventeen places they had pierced it like needles going through the rind of a cheese. Seventeen tiny air-leaks had been plugged with a special gun firing bullets of near-molten lead.

The ship had the pitiful air of something whacked almost to death, like a maltreated horse. It lay exhausted on the desert sand, its tubes cooling for the last time, its casing showing a few dim hairlines of gold like remnants of departed glory.

Vaguely discernible near the tail were coppery traces of the vessel's identification number: M.1. A number once to be conjured with. A number to fill the world's television screens and thrill the minds of millions. Newspapers still nursed heads in four-inch caps featuring that identification.

M.1. COMES BACK.

They'd not had the opportunity to use it. M.1. was out of time and place. The proper time lay many months back. The proper place was Luna City spaceport whence it had departed. Not here, lying in the desert like a corpse escaped from its grave. Not here with none to witness save the lizards and Gila monsters, the scrubwood, cacti and tortured Joshua trees.

The man who came out the airlock was no better preserved than his ship. Gaunt, with hollow cheeks and protruding cheekbones, skinny arms and legs. His eyes had the luminous shine of the feverish. Yet he was active enough. He could get around fine

providing it was at his own pace. That pace had three speeds: leisurely, slow and dead-slow.

James Vail, thirty-three, test pilot first class. Thirty-tree? He brushed thin fingers through long, tangled hair, knew that he felt like sixty and probably looked it. So much the better. The sharp-eyed and inquisitive would pass him by, fooled by his apparent years. With all their resources the powers-that-be would find it hard to trace a man who had aged enough to be his own father.

He left the ship without a qualm or so much as a backward glance. With respect to the vessel and its contents his conscience was clear. World scientists would find precisely what they wanted within that exhausted cylinder. All arranged in readiness for them: the samples, records, photographs, meterings, the cogent data. He had been meticulous about that. He had followed the line of duty to the last, the very last. There was nothing missing—save the crew.

A road ran seven miles to the north. He had landed the ship strategically, as near as he dared but safely concealed behind a long ridge. Now he set forth to reach the road, scuffling the sand like a stumblebum, resting eight times on the way. A mile at a stretch was as much as he could manage. Once upon a time he could have run the entire seven and then done a tap-dance. He'd been fitter and fresher then, with more weight, more muscle, more stamina.

Traffic was sparse and the wait for a hitch likely to be prolonged. That, too, could be regarded as advantageous in that it reduced the chance of some passer-by having seen the ship swooping in the distance.

He sat on a boulder, hands deep in pockets, and bided his time. If he had learned one thing these last couple of years it was how to wait in patience when nothing whatever can be done to hasten events. A gaudy coral snake squirmed from the shadow behind his boulder and glided into the desert to escape his presence. He stared with blank expectancy up the road and remained unaware of the snake's existence.

In due time a big green sedan showed up, ignored his thumb and roared past with a rush of wind and a scatter of hot grit. Without resentment he resumed his seat on the boulder. In the next couple of hours eight cars and a creaking feed-wagon pretended that he was not there. Eventually a huge red truck picked him up.

'Where ya for?' asked the driver, putting it in gear and letting it lumber forward.

James Vail settled himself comfortably in the cab, said, 'Doesn't matter much. Any place where I can get a train.'

The driver glanced at his passenger's hands, noted blue veins and swollen knuckles. He firmed his lips, stared silently through the windshield. After a while he spoke again.

'Down on your luck, chum?'

'Not really. I've been sick.'

'You look it.'

Vail smiled wryly. 'Some folk look worse than they are.'

'How come you got stranded out here in the wilds?'

That was an awkward one. He thought it over, knowing that his mind was working with unaccustomed slowness.

'I was dumped six or seven miles back. I've been walking quite a piece. Nobody would give me a lift. Probably thought I'd try to stick them for a few bucks.'

'That happens,' agreed the driver. 'I've got a sweet way of coping with such tricks.'

He did not offer details of his special technique. Evidently it was intended as a warning. He was a big man, red-faced and tough but amiable. The type who would strangle a boon-doggler and then give his dinner to a hungry cat.

'A trucker can pick up trouble any time the day or night,' the driver confided. 'A hundred miles back there was a flashy dame on the kerb waving like crazy. Oho, I says and beats it straight past. I been on this route before, see, and—'

He continued his reminiscences for an hour while Vail lolled by his side and filled occasional pauses with monosyllabic assurances that he was listening. The truck trundled into a small town. Vail sat erect studying its shops. His tongue licked across thin, pale lips.

'Reckon this place will do me.'

'You're forty miles from the railhead yet,' the driver pointed out.

'Near enough. I'll make it later.'

The truck stopped. Vail got down, moving stiffly.

'Thanks, brother. I appreciate the favour.'

'Think nothing of it.' The other waved a friendly hand, tooled his load away.

Vail stood on the sidewalk and watched the crimson bulk roll from sight. Just as well not to stay with that too long, he thought. A trail is harder to follow when breaks are frequent and erratic. In due time his would be picked up and every effort made to trace it through. Nothing was surer than that.

They would find the ship later today or perhaps tomorrow or even the day after. In these modern times air-traffic was heavy enough to ensure that some observant pilot would notice the grounded rocket and report it. State police would go take a look at it, recognize it, call in the scientists. They'd open it, search it from end to end, become excited by the presence of all they'd sought but worried by absence of people.

From that moment the hunt would be on. Police spotter-planes scouring the desert. Police cars tearing along the roads. Vehicles halted over a wide area and drivers questioned.

'Did you go past that point? At what time? Did you see anything extraordinary? Did you notice a couple of fellows hanging around?'

Sooner or later a car or motor-cycle would stop a big red truck.

'You did, eh? About ten-thirty? What was he like? Where did he say he was going? Where did you drop him?'

A phone-call back to this town and the local law out in force trying to pick up the new lead.

Yes, they'd be looking for him all right. Puzzled over his importance with no criminal charge entered against him. But they'd obey orders and look, wanting him badly, moving fast and far.

Well, they weren't going to find him.

He entered a cheap restaurant down a side-street. In here of all places, he must control himself, behaving casually enough to draw no undue attention. Finding a vacant table, he sat at it, consulted the menu with artificial boredom. It was a hell of an effort.

A blonde and blowsy waitress came, flicked invisible crumbs from the table, awaited his order. Her eyes softened as she studied him, finding him a distinct change from the daily horde of fat guzzlers. The difference made him appeal to her suppressed maternal instincts.

'Ham and eggs,' he said.

She weighed him up again, asked, 'Double?'

Biting back the response he wanted to make he forced himself to say, 'No—I'll have pie to follow.'

It took a few minutes. He waited in patience, closing his eyes from time to time, compelling his mind to disregard sizzling sounds and appetising odours issuing from the kitchen.

The load she brought made him suspect that she had taken matters into her own hands. If this were an ordinary serving what

was a double helping like? It alarmed him a little. It meant, perhaps, that she had got the measure of him and therefore would remember him.

Trackers follow the trail with the aid of people who find cause to remember the seemingly ordinary.

He must eat and get out of here with the minimum of delay. Yet he could not show indecent haste. So he picked up his knife and fork, shuddered slightly as he felt them in his fingers. Then slowly he got through the plateful, savouring every morsel and pretending not to notice the waitress watching from the far end.

The moment he had finished she was back at the table removing the plate and eyeing him inquiringly.

'No pie,' he said. 'You gave me too much. Just a coffee.'

Momentary puzzlement showed in her features. Somewhere her calculations had gone wrong. Shows you can't judge folk by appearances, she decided. The longer one lives the more one learns.

Vail drank his coffee in easy sips, paid and went out. He did not turn to see whether her gaze was upon him as he departed. Behave normally at all times, insisted his mind. Behave normally.

With the same unhurried air he strolled along the street, crossed a main artery, found another modest eating place. He went inside, had two large servings of pie and another coffee.

A-a-h! that was better. Next call gained him a pack of cigarettes. He lit up and inhaled in the manner of one tasting the joys of paradise. Near the shop a long-distance bus pulled into a stop and an old lady with luggage struggled aboard. Vail managed a sudden sprint that would have been beyond him a short while ago. Clambering in, he found a seat near the front.

Trail-break number two.

At the end of three weeks he had settled himself seventeen hundred miles from M.1. Sheer distance provided a margin of safety no matter how temporary. He had a room in a dilapidated but adequate boarding-house, a job in a factory. Trainee welder, they called him. From test pilot to trainee welder. He'd come down like a rocket.

Doubtless he could find employment better than that, something more suited to his capabilities if he looked around long enough. But the two hundred dollars with which he had landed had slowly and surely dribbled away. Anything would do to keep him going pending appearance of other and better opportunities.

His looks had changed over these three weeks and he now bore reasonably close resemblance to the picture on his pilot licence.

Cheeks had filled out, arms and legs thickened, hair grown thicker and darker. His name also had changed. The factory filing system had him indexed as Harry Reber, forty-two, single and unattached.

Security of a job did not provide mental ease. He could not escape consciousness of the falsity of his position. Fellow-workers emphasised it almost every hour of every day. They would bawl, 'Harry!' and frequently he would fail to respond and they would notice the failure. With the swift appreciation of men who toil they recognised him as one several cuts above his present station. They made mental note of the fact that none of his conversations revealed a worthwhile thing about himself. There was a mystery about him sometimes discussed in desultory manner when he wasn't around. Left-wingers theorised that he was a stool-pigeon for the bosses. The others suspected a prison record.

All this could have been avoided and the square peg neatly fitted into a square hole by seeking a post with the moon-boats. Pilots were always wanted there, especially top-graders. The hunters knew that too. They'd be waiting for just such a move and ready with a counter-move of their own.

'James Vail? I am a Federal officer. It is my duty to—'

Hah! He would not give them the chance. Duty they'd call it to drag him where he did not want to go. What did they really know of duty? He had done his own duty according to his lights as best he could in terrible circumstances. Let that be enough and more than enough. Let him live in peace and obscurity without being crucified for the sake of other, lesser duties.

Every morning and evening when going to or from work he bought the latest paper, scanned the headlines. Then at first opportunity he'd go right through it page by page, column by column. He grabbed one this evening, took it to his room, studied it from front to back.

Nothing about M.1. Not a solitary word. Yet they must have found it by now. They must want the crew. Nevertheless nothing had been issued to the Press.

Why this secrecy?

It occurred to him as a somewhat remote and rather ridiculous possibility that those equipped to deal with the data on the ship might question its authenticity, might be unable to define it as true or false. Somebody with a strong imagination may have ventured the notion that it was all an elaborate hoax.

Though far-fetched such a theory would explain the missing crew. They hadn't landed. They had never arrived. They had suffered some indescribable fate and something else had brought

the ship home, something non-human and now running loose God knows where. Or, alternatively, the crew had brought back the ship while possessed by parasitic masters now roaming the earth with their human hosts.

Fantastic and not a little stupid—but if journalists managed to brew up such ideas for the sake of sensationalism they would scare the living daylights out of the public. Silence alone could prevent a wholesale stampede.

He shrugged fatalistically, fished out of his case a tattered newspaper rescued from a junkshop several days ago. Laying on the bed he opened it for the umpteenth time, absorbed the front page. Every time he did this he marvelled at how quickly bygone events fade from public memory. Today the main subject of interest was the final stage of the Scarpilo murder trial. Probably not one person in court could recall the names of those who had made the headlines in this sheet dated most of two years back.

M.1. TAKES OFF.

Luna City. 9.0 GMT. The first ship to Mars roared into an airless sky and vanished precisely at deadline this morning. Pilot James Vail and Co-Pilot Richard Kingston are on their way. By the time this report reaches the streets the long arm of Mankind will be extended many thousands of miles into the cosmos.

And so it went on and on and on. Pages full of it. Pictures of Vail, dark-haired and solemn. Pictures of Kingston, fair, curly and grinning like a cat that has swiped the cream. Pictures of the President pressing the button that banged-off the boat by remote control. Articles by scientists about the men, the ship and the equipment. Essays on how they'd cope with Martian conditions, what they hoped to discover.

A nine days' wonder. It had remained no more until the ship was due back. Then the papers and public interest had perked up again.

M.1. EXPECTED SOON.

More pics, more articles, more anticipatory huzzahs. A coming thunderclap in human history. Nothing happened. The ominous note sounded two or three weeks later with the vessel that much overdue. It built up over the next month. It ended with grim acceptance of disaster. M.1. was no more. Vail and Kingston had paid for Mars just as twenty had paid with their lives for the moon. *Requiescat in pace.*

And better luck next time.

He wondered whether the tardy return of M.1. had delayed or accelerated that same next time. Nothing he had read so far had

made mention of any M.2. The authorities had a habit of keeping such things quiet until the last moment. However, it was most probable that up there high in the sky on Luna another ship was taking shape and two or possibly three men were preparing for a second assault on the Red Planet.

There lay a major reason for pursuit of himself. They wanted the story from his own lips. They would never be satisfied with what he had left them.

What had he left them? One, there was a complete record of the ship's flight performance outward and inward. Two, the story of the main driver tube's crack-up, how they'd repaired it and how long it had taken. Three, full details of equipment faults or inadequacies of which there had proved not a few.

Samples of Martian sand and bedrock, spa and quartz, plus flakes of lignite-like substance that were anisotropic and therefore of possible use to radar. Several fourteen feet long string-thin earthworms coiled into pickle-jars. Also suspended in formalin were a few of those harmless wrigglers that might be either true snakes or legless lizards. Eight species of bugs. Twenty-seven varieties of lichens. Thirty of tiny fungi. Nothing big because Mars harboured no life-forms of any size.

And he'd left them general data in great quantity. Water-dispersion maps showing supplies sparse except within two hundred miles of polar-cap rims. Gravitic, magnetic field, photon intensity and numerous other measurements. Temperature records running between 30°C and minus 80°C. Oxygen pressure meterings from ·5 to ·9mm. Hg. Notes by the book-full and graphs by the yard. It had been done as thoroughly as mortal men could do it.

But it wasn't enough.

A small part of the tale had been left out and they'd want that too—in his own words.

To hell with them!

In the mid-morning ten days later the shop foreman yelled, 'Harry!'

It went in one ear and out the other.

The foreman crossed the floor, nudged him. 'You deaf or something? I just called you. You're wanted at the front office.'

Vail cut off his flame with a faint pop, closed valves on gas cylinders, removed his helmet and dark glasses. He tramped along a chequerplate catwalk, down steel stairs to outside. Moving him to another part of the plant, he hazarded, or perhaps about to

fire him. Reaching the corner he turned toward the office which was constructed in the style of a glasshouse.

That was the hunter's first mistake: waiting in plain view. Their second was in choosing a uniformed cop to drop the heavy hand. Vail saw who was there before he could be seen. He turned again, moved swiftly into the alley alongside the girder shop, got to the farther end, made his way to the time office.

There he found his card and clocked out. The watchman on duty ostentatiously consulted the time and looked him over.

'Heck's up with you?'

'Going home.'

'Who said you could?'

'If you don't approve go see the chief,' Vail suggested.

He walked out leaving the other disgruntled but not inclined to take action. Going straight to his room he packed, paid his bill, called a taxi. Although he did not know it he escaped by little more than one minute. The taxi was hardly out of sight when two men arrrived, checked the address, strolled in and came out running. They snooped around the station half an hour after his train pulled out.

Wires hummed alongside four routes taken by locomotives during those thirty minutes. Distant bus stations were staked. Police cars and motor-cycles prowled exit roads. Switchmen and brakesmen searched assembled freight trains and marshalling yards for roof-bedders and rod-riders. Life became a misery for a few toughs, tramps and parolees.

They did not get him. Vail's wits had perked up along with his body. He had a mind designed for split-second decisions and equally quick translation into action. A test pilot's mind accustomed to facing sudden and grave problems and snatching the only way out.

Weeks ago, long weary weeks ago he had weighed up a major crisis, dealt with it and thereby created his present fix, there being no alternative in sight. Now he was dealing with the result in the only possible way: by keeping on the run until he was caught or forgotten. If they caught him he would surrender all they wanted. But they must catch him first. On the other hand, if he could avoid capture for long enough they might forget him or dismiss him as of no consequence. That could happen in due time. His importance would shrink to well-nigh nothing if M.2. landed on Mars.

Eighty-five miles out the train slowed at a crossing. A travelling circus was the cause. It had halted in a colourful, mile-long

procession waiting for the train to pass. The engineer reduced speed to a crawl for the sake of a line of fidgety elephants at the head.

Everyone gaped through nearest windows at the circus. By the time they looked back Vail was out the opposite side, case in hand. He got a lift on the tailboard of a lion cage, sharing it with an unshaven character who could take out his teeth and force his bottom lip right up over his nose.

Forty miles farther on he had a job. The carnival hit its pitch and he was hired as a stake-driver, rope-puller and general factotum. He dragged heavy canvas until his finger-tips were raw, watched the Big Top rise billowing and huge. He helped set up the ropes, ladders and trapezes for the Flying Artellos, addressed the Big Fat Lady as Daisy and the India Rubber Man as Herman. He learned to refer to lions as cats and elephants as bulls, to grab a stake and yell, 'Hey, Rube!' when local hoods busted a sideshow or mauled a barker.

This was far different from the factory, especially in one important respect. Nobody pried into his past, nobody resented his buttoned lip. They did not care a damn whether he was an embezzler come to the end of his loot or the King of Siam travelling incognito. That alone would have made him reasonably happy—if memories can be dismissed. But they cannot, they cannot.

The depths of his mind remained with him though repressed. He had a vivid dream one night as he tossed on a straw bed. He was racing at top speed through a long, dark tunnel, his feet gradually growing heavier and heavier. Other feet were pounding behind, drawing nearer and nearer. Voices called hoarsely in loud command.

He ignored the voices, strove to make his feet move impossibly fast. A reverberating blast sounded behind and a stream of bullets flew over his left shoulder. The next lot would be right in the back, breaking his spine and tearing his heart. His shoulder-blades cringed in anticipation as he tried to drag boots now weighing a ton apiece. The tunnel was endless and without avenue of escape. The voices bawled again. This was it!

Violent jerking woke him up. Someone was shaking his shoulder. He opened eyes, saw over him the hollow features of Albert, the Human Skeleton. The vision was worse than the dream because of what was secreted within his mind and the shock of it made him try to yell but no sound came out.

'Gosh,' said Albert. 'You give me a turn carrying on that way.'

Vail sat up, rubbed his eyes. 'I had a lousy nightmare.'

'I'll say. You were pedalling an invisible bike just as fast as you could go. And groaning something awful. Ain't feeling sick, are you?'

'No, I'm all right. Don't worry. It was just a dream.'

The Human Skeleton returned to his straw bag, lay down, folded hands across his skinny middle. The pose held unconscious horror. He looked overdue for the box.

Vail shivered, turned onto his side and closed his eyes. He could not sleep now. His brain seemed stimulated into abnormal activity and insisted on pondering the situation.

Somehow or other he'd been traced to that factory, how he did not know. Possibly by sheer persistent legwork on the part of many. That meant they were definitely after him, the chase was more than a mere expectation of his own. And that in turn meant that despite continued silence M.1. had been found.

Therefore he would have to keep breaking the trail no matter how smooth and enticing any section of it might be. He must not succumb to the temptation to stay with the circus too long. Neither must he hang around in the next place or the next. No rest for the wicked was a trite remark being sweatily illustrated.

When the hunt keeps on the move the fox can't sit for ever in the covert.

He found work for the last time a thousand miles eastward. He had crossed the continent, could not go further short of taking to the seas. That was an idea not to be discarded. Sailors pass out of reach for long periods and can be most difficult to trace, particularly if they jump ships in foreign ports.

For the time being he was satisfied with a checker's post on the landing-bay of a plant making cardboard containers. It paid modestly, enabled him to have a cheap apartment in a brownstone a mile away and, above all, kept him concealed among the labouring hordes.

Eleven weeks had gone by since he'd thumbed that red truck and still the television and the newspapers let out not a squawk. What discussions and arguments had taken place in official and scientific circles could be left to the imagination. The missing part of the story would have saved them a lot of breath, enabled them to see his problem and its sole solution. But those details were denied, leaving them with nothing but mystery.

Oh, the quandary he and Kingston had been compelled to contemplate. That busted driver and the weeks it consumed in

putting right. The inevitability of planetary motions that can be slowed or halted for no man. The time that must be spent awaiting the next moment of vantage.

They'd filled a deal of that time making further and futile tests, raking Mars for what it had to offer and finding the cupboard appallingly bare. In his mind's eye he could see Kingston now, retching violently beside an overturned cooker. Not one of the thirteen fungi or twenty-seven lichens were edible. They could be swallowed fresh, boiled, baked or fried and they went straight down and came straight up, leaving a man feeling ten times worse than before.

The question they'd had to answer was a very simple one, namely, whether to get the boat back at any cost or let it rot in the pink sands forever. Both knew there was only one response: M.1. *must* return. It could be done and they knew how it could be done but never on this side of heaven could they agree about how to apply the method. The solution was not one for calm, reasoned discussion; it was for prompt settlement in one way only.

Brooding over these things as he sat on the edge of his bed, he heard a knock, answered it without apprehension. Two large men in plain clothes muscled through the open door.

The newcomers stood side by side estimating him with hard, shrewd eyes. Yet a mite of uncertainty lay below their normal assurance. This was the first time in their experience that they'd been ordered to bring in a man without knowing the reason and without legal justification for arrest. Presumably he should be requested to come along as a special favour—and be carried out bodily if he refused. Anyway, this was one of the wanted pair. The other might not be far away.

'You're James Vail,' said the older of the two. It was a statement, not a question.

'Yes.'

No use denying it. The hunt had ended all too soon. The law's nation-wide net was more efficient and harder to evade than he'd ever believed.

Well, they'd got him. Lies might serve to delay the issue but never to avert it. Truth must out sooner or later. Get it over and done with. Get it off his mind. Strangely enough, he thought of that with a sense of vast relief.

'Where is Kingston?' demanded the other, hopefully.

James Vail stood up, hands dangling. He felt as if his belly was sticking out a mile with the whole world staring at it. The answer came in a voice scarcely recognisable as his own.

'I ate him.'

Freaks

All shapes and sizes, human and inhuman . . . but all with one thing in common, a hatred and fear of man.

A human rhinoceros — eighteen inches long

A man-eating tree — that killed only before rain

A blood-crazed dwarf — to whom murder was a profession

A man who made mutants — no matter how monstrous

As you can see this is a book about the dark tides in human affairs. It will thrill and chill the blood of those among us whose curiosity knows no restraint; and the others who are magnetically drawn by the dreadful. . . .